NEW
NICK CARTER WEEKLY

Issued weekly. By Subscription $2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at New York Post Office by STREET & SMITH, *79-89 Seventh Ave., N. Y.*

No. 456. *Price, Five Cents.*

THE COMPACT OF DEATH

OR NICK CARTER'S SINGED HAIR CLEW

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"

The count drew a knife, plunged it deeply into the breast of the young man in woman's attire, jumped into the cab, just escaping a shot from Chick's pistol.

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THE COMPACT OF DEATH;

OR,

Nick Carter's Singed Hair Clew.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

A GHASTLY REMINDER.

It was early evening, the air was mild and the sky was clear. Nick Carter, cigar in mouth, came out of the Auditorium Annex and strolled along Michigan Avenue, in the direction of Jackson Boulevard. A soft breeze from Lake Michigan pleasantly fanned his cheeks and soothing music from the orchestra of the nearby Illinois Theater, where the evening performance was about to begin, increased his content of mind. He had been in Chicago but a few hours, having stopped over for a day on his way from St. Louis to New York, and, without any business on hand, was in a mood for sightseeing.

He had just reached the boulevard and was about to turn the corner and go up to State Street, when a well-dressed young man, coming from the boulevard on a run, violently collided with him. Nick's nose suffered most from the contact, and for a moment he saw stars. As the young man, with a hurried apology, was about to pass on, the detective caught him by the arm. "You will have to explain why you were running before I can let you go," he said, bluntly. "You may have committed a crime, for aught I know."

"For God's sake," pleaded the other, "don't detain me. I have done nothing wrong and I am in danger of my life."

So saying, he tried to wrench himself from Nick Carter's grasp. But Nick held on the tighter.

"All the more reason why you should stay with me. I may be able to help you."

"Help me? You can never do that. Come, let me go. I am a dead man if you keep me here any longer."

The speaker's terror was so pronounced that Nick concluded to move on. Still holding the agitated young man by the arm, he took his way across Michigan Avenue to the park.

As they walked, the young man gave backward glances, full of fear, over his shoulder. But, as no one followed them, he presently sighed with relief. "Perhaps I was mistaken," he said, in a quiet tone of voice. "The man I saw near the theater may have been a total stranger."

All this was Greek to Nick Carter. Curiosity aroused, he said, when they had found a bench upon an elevation overlooking the shore: "If you are an honest man, and I take you to be one"—Nick had improved his time while they walked by quiet but searching observation—"you will tell me, another honest man, what you fear and who and what is the character and purposes of the man you thought you saw a few minutes ago."

The young man compressed his lips and shook his head. His face, dark and handsome, was as pale as death. "I do not know you," he replied, "and even if I did, I might not consider it advisable to talk about my personal affairs."

"How can you obtain help if you don't talk of them?"

"I am past help." There was a note of despair in the utterance.

Nick scented a dangerous secret. Sympathy as well as curiosity prompted this remark.

"You have an enemy, and you think he is infallible as regards his ability to punish. Did it ever occur to you that a man of evil instincts and evil actions—presuming, of course, that your enemy is that kind of a man—is, as a rule, despite his cunning, no match for the cool, shrewd, self-contained man of integrity and intelligence?"

"I'll admit that the rule is as you put it; but my enemy is backed by a force that makes him invincible. If I were in New York now, and in the presence of one man, I might qualify my statement. I might say that my enemy is invincible when opposing anyone save and except Nick Carter."

The great detective would not have been human if the cockles of his heart had not warmed at these words.

"Then," said he, in a quiet but authoritative manner, "you may tell your story. I am Nick Carter."

The young man started, his eyes glistened with hope and joy. Then, in the light cast by the electric lamps, he scrutinized Nick's features earnestly and carefully. The result satisfied him, for he said: "I have seen Sandow and I have heard of the resemblance you bear to him. So you are Mr. Carter?" He sighed with relief. "Fate must have thrown you in my way to-night."

"If so, I hope fate will be kind," returned the detective.

"So do I; but," he shivered, "it may be that you have come into my life too late to dispel the dark clouds that have gathered about me. You shall hear my story, and when you have heard it, you will understand that there is a terrible basis for my fears. My name is Rupert Allanson. My father was a native of Sweden, my mother a native of Italy. I was born in Sicily, where my father owned a large vineyard, and there I lived until my fifteenth year, when I was sent to England to be educated. With me went my younger brother, Ralph. Three years ago, when I was twenty-two and Ralph nineteen, we returned to Sicily as orphans. Some unknown disease had taken them both—father and mother—away in the same month.

"When the affairs of the estate had been straightened out, it was found that Ralph and I had inherited a fortune. We were no sooner freed from the machinery of the courts than our troubles began. Our steward was a man of middle age, a Scotchman, whom my father had brought from Glasgow shortly after his marriage to my mother. He was both competent and faithful. One day I was waited upon by a picturesque villain, who looked as if he might have just come from the mountain haunt of the Sicilian banditti. His long, black hair, his black, curling mustaches, his piercing eyes, now gleaming with ferocity, now twinkling in glee; his white, even teeth, and the grace with which he carried himself, the cool assurance with which he spoke, said as plainly as words: 'I am master of the situation. Oppose my wishes at your peril.' Introducing himself, he informed me that he was Curatola of the Cosca."

Nick whistled softly. "I begin to see," he said. "The Mafia had put you on the list."

"Yes. I did not know it then, but the information came a short time afterward. Soon I learned what all Italy knows, that there is an organization which defies the law and is a law unto itself. You know what the Mafia is, and you know, of course, that in every important town of Sicily the Mafia is represented by the Cosca. Among the officers the Curatola exercises the most important functions. He lays the trap for the victim, and no crime is too dreadful when the preservation of the Cosca is at stake or the execution of an act of vengeance is involved. In a case of vengeance, the person concerned is condemned in secret session, and the man who is to commit the murder is chosen by lot.

"I had heard, while a boy, that the members of the Mafia collect, peaceably or by force, a large tribute from the owners of great estates and the rich people of their neighborhood, and I was now to have a practical demonstration of the graft. The Curatola, with a smile that was all of evil, opened the conversation by saying that the estate represented by the brothers Allanson had been marked for tribute, and that for the purpose of having the matter put in proper shape, I must discharge my honest, invaluable steward and put in his place a man selected by the Cosca. My first impulse was to turn the Curatola over to my servants for a flogging and a ducking, but, on second thought, I concluded to deal with the situation coolly and cautiously. Had I known

at the time the extent and strength of the Mafia, I might not have been so ready to defy it. I told the Curatola that I would take his demand under consideration, and would give my answer in one week. He shrugged his shoulders, smiled again and took himself off. I should have liked to have consulted with my brother, but he was in England, visiting friends. I felt satisfied, however, that he would approve the course which I intended to adopt. An hour after the departure of the agent of the Cosca I was closeted with the judge of the court. He was an old friend of my father and a man of learning, sense and discretion. He listened to my tale, and remained for some time in deep thought. At last he said: 'My boy, I would give my right hand to stamp out the greatest evil that has ever afflicted poor Sicily. You cannot, with safety to yourself, oppose the designs of this powerful criminal combine. Don't attempt it; give in gracefully.'

"But the longer he talked the higher rose my indignation over the Curatola's proposition of blackmail. I would not believe that the laws of the country were powerless to cope with the Cosca. 'You Sicilians are easy-going,' I said, hotly, 'and you have submitted for so many years to barefaced robbery that you have allowed yourselves to think that there is no redress. I'll show you that there is one man who will stand firm in resistance to the demands of this cutthroat organization.'

"The judge sighed and told me to go ahead. I needed an object lesson, and I would undoubtedly receive one. Well, the week passed and the Curatola returned for his answer. Curtly I informed him that I declined to discharge my steward and that not one *centessimo* from my estate should go as tribute to the Cosca. Without a word, but with a black look, the Curatola went away. A few days afterward a section of the vineyard was laid waste and the fields of grain were strewn with salt. Like a fool I appealed to the law, making direct complaint against Lucio Palazzo, the Curatola. He was arrested, but the trial was a farce. The jury acquitted him without leaving their seats. About this time my brother returned. He was full of fight, and meeting Palazzo in a lane near the vineyard, gave the rascal a beating that made him a good subject for the hospital. Palazzo carried a knife, but he made no attempt to use it. My brother thought it singular that the villain should rely on his fists alone to withstand the attack which was made upon him, but I was not so obtuse. I knew that Palazzo had marked Ralph for no easy death.

"That night I spent hours in arguing with my brother. It was hard work, but finally he consented to leave home for a few months and allow me to manage affairs. I believed it was death for him to remain in Sicily, and before I had got through talking with him, he had come to entertain the same belief. He is no coward, Mr. Carter, and he is not selfish. I could not get his consent to leave until I had promised to follow his example within a fortnight. During that time I hoped to sell the estate. With the proceeds I would go to the United States, and with Ralph make a new home under the Stars and Stripes. It was yet for me to learn that the dreaded Mafia has its representatives and its branches in America.

"The day following Ralph's departure, which was secretly managed, I caught a member of the Cosca cutting down grapevines in a section of the vineyard where the most valuable vines were planted. It was early morning, much earlier than my usual hour for arising. Enraged at the sight I drew my pistol and shot the wretch in the leg. I could easily have killed him outright, but I thought a bullet in the leg would be sufficient as a lesson. When I saw him fall I went to the house and had some of my servants carry the man to the place of detention behind the court of justice. Meanwhile, I made my report to my friend, the judge. He was horrified. I had pronounced my own death sentence. There was no escape. Flight would now be impossible. I heard him out, learned more of the terrible power of the Mafia, but stubbornly refused to make an attempt to run away. That night my house was burned to the ground and I was shot twice while trying to save some of my valuables from the flames. Fortunately, as I thought at the time, my wounds were not fatal, and in the judge's house and under the best of care, I soon recovered. During my convalescence I was placed in possession of so many facts regarding the operations of the Mafia that I could no longer hold to my determination to fight it. It was borne home to me that I must leave Sicily never to return. That I was able to make my escape was due to the loyalty and ingenuity of the judge. In London I rejoined my brother, and there we effected a sale of our Sicilian property to an Italian who was willing to take his chances with the Mafia's ally, the Cosca.

"We stayed in London two months. Before we left, a letter from the judge informed us that he had learned, through one of the police spies, that the Cosca had sentenced both my brother and myself to death, and that the choice of slayer had fallen upon Lucio Palazzo, the Curatola. His instructions were to follow us to the ends of the earth, if need be, and to call upon the representatives of the Mafia wherever he might find them and whenever he might want assistance.

"Two months ago we arrived in Chicago and took rooms in a respectable, quiet quarter of the city, under assumed names. Until to-night I thought we had eluded the search of our remorseless enemy. Now I am in doubt, for just before I met you so unceremoniously, Mr. Carter, I could have sworn I saw Lucio Palazzo on Jackson Boulevard. I was near the Illinois Theater, and happening to look across the street, I saw him plainly. And he saw me, for he turned his head instantly and ap-

peared to become deeply interested in a window display. Overcome with terror I started to run, and——"

"Bumped up against me," said Nick. "Now we must consider the situation. You must not return to your room, that's flat. It is evident that this Palazzo has not yet spotted your residence. Your brother, therefore, is for the present, safe. I can't say 'Come along with me,' for if we are watched, as we probably are, your hiding place to-night would become known. I have it. Come."

Rupert Alanson arose and obediently walked beside the detective, who, on reaching Michigan Avenue, halted. While they had been talking, automobile after automobile had dashed along the smooth, bituminous pavement of the avenue, the majority of them guided by professional chauffeurs, engaged for the evening by pleasure seekers and sightseers.

Nick had not more than five minutes to wait before an auto, with only the chauffeur on board, came at an easy speed from the south. The detective hailed the chauffeur, and the auto drew up to the sidewalk. A few low words, and then Rupert, after giving Nick the street and number of the residence where Ralph Alanson might be found, took a seat in the auto and was rapidly whirled away. The young man's instructions were to leave the auto in the outskirts, preferably at or near Garfield Park, and then find his way to one of the lodging houses in the vicinity. In the morning he was to phone Nick and receive further orders. Of course the chauffeur was to be agreeably silenced respecting the point at which his fare alighted.

"That's the best I can do," thought Nick, as he walked to the hotel, "and there are ninety-nine chances against one in favor of its working out all right. To-morrow morning will show whether or not Lucio Palazzo made a successful play with his one chance."

The morning did show. Nick Carter was dressing in his room when there came a call at the telephone.

"Trunk down here in the office. Just come. Shall I have it sent up to you?"

"Yes," answered the detective, wondering the while who could have sent him a trunk.

In a few minutes the trunk, a small, cheap affair, was before him. Nick looked at it thoughtfully. It seemed off color. There was the address plain enough, only—only his given name was spelt "Nicolas." A strange suspicion crept into his mind. He stooped and smelled of the trunk, and as he did so his face paled. Stepping to the stand which held the water pitcher, he drank copiously. Then, with a shudder, he unbuckled the straps of the trunk. It was not locked. Lifting the cover quickly, his eyes fell upon something which drove all the color from his face. The trunk contained a human head, and the ghastly, blood-stained face was the face of Rupert Alanson!

CHAPTER II.

WHERE THE DEED WAS DONE.

Nick Carter, in the course of his life, had met with many strange experiences, had seen many startling sights; but the spectacle which greeted his eyes when he threw open the trunk so affected his sensibilities that he was fain to open the window and let in the fresh air. If he had not seen and talked with Rupert Alanson but a few hours before, if he had not taken a deep interest in the young man's case; if his sympathies, together with his professional inquisitiveness, had not been strongly aroused, he might have looked upon the ghastly spectacle with the cool, dispassionate eye of the specialist in criminology.

But he was soon master of himself. The detective spirit came to the fore, and the brain began to work actively. In the first place, it was clearly apparent that the murderer was an adept in cunning. The odds had been against him the evening before, and yet he had succeeded in overcoming all obstacles. The chauffeur could not have betrayed Alanson. Even if susceptible to any golden temptation offered by the artful Sicilian, the bribery could not have been accomplished until some little time after the victim had left the automobile. As Alanson had not selected a place of concealment for the night, and had some distance to walk before making that selection, it would be impossible for the chauffeur to give the murderer any information of value unless he had followed Alanson after the young man had dismissed him and taken to the pavement. When the chauffeur was engaged, Nick had taken note of his badge, and knew that he was employed by the largest auto touring company in Chicago, and also that the man had an honest, intelligent countenance.

Without going into a further analysis of the case, Nick telephoned the nearest police station. After the trunk, with its grewsome property, had been removed, and Nick had used the phone to talk a few minutes with the chief of police, he called up Ralph Alanson, brother of the murdered man. Giving his real name, the detective said he was working in the interest of Rupert, and that on no account must Ralph leave the house where he was staying until further instructions. "I have something to say to you in relation to your brother," Nick went on, "but I cannot say it over the phone. He was kept from you last night by the discovery that he was being followed by Lucio Palazzo. I am talking to you from the Auditorium Annex. If you desire to assure yourself that I am, indeed, Nick Carter, the detective, call up the manager of the hotel."

A pleasant baritone voice, in some nervousness, answered: "I will do as you say, but where is my brother now?"

Nick Carter feared to tell Ralph the truth, for it was probable that the young man, furnished with the horrify-

ing intelligence, might throw caution to the winds and venture out upon the street, and make his way either to the hotel or the police office. For his own sake, it were better that the shocking news should be withheld for a few hours, long enough for Nick to make some necessary investigations and prepare his plans. His reply to Ralph Alanson's question was, therefore, an evasive one. "I am not at liberty to make explanation at this moment," he said, "but I will call on you at noon and tell you everything." There was some further talk, and in the end Ralph promised to follow the instructions given by the detective.

Having settled with the brother, Nick went downstairs and made inquiries about the trunk. It had been delivered at the hotel by a driver of a well-known transfer company, with offices on La Salle Street. Nick hastened to the place, and was informed that the trunk had been taken from a corner of Garfield Park in response to a telephone order.

"Who was with the trunk when the driver arrived at the park?" asked the detective.

"A boy, who said that he was acting for a man who had just left to catch the train for Buffalo."

"Had the driver ever seen the boy before?"

"No; but he was a specimen of the ordinary street gamin."

"Did the driver ask any questions?"

"No. He had been ordered to go for a trunk, he had found the trunk, and as the address was plainly marked, there was nothing for him to do but drive to the Auditorium Annex."

Inquiries at and about Garfield Park failed to bring much information of value. A gardener had noticed a boy near the corner standing by a trunk, but had paid little attention to him. He had seen no one speaking to the boy.

"At what time do you come on duty?" questioned Nick.

"Six o'clock."

"Was the boy in sight then?"

"He may have been at the corner or somewhere in the vicinity, for I entered the park from Washington Street and did not go to the opposite side of the park, where I saw the boy, until after seven o'clock."

"Did you ever see the boy before?"

"I might have seen him a hundred times and yet not be able to pick him out of a crowd of boys. There are thousands like him in this city."

"How old was he, in your opinion?"

"Twelve or thirteen."

"How was he dressed?"

"About like that kid yonder," pointing to a small boy across the street.

"May not that be the boy?"

"No; he is much smaller than the boy I saw at the corner with the trunk."

Nick left the gardener, to have a talk with the urchin. The little fellow was standing by the curb with his hands in his pockets and whistling through his teeth, his evident intention being to attract the notice of a girl of about his own age who was leaning out of a window in the second story of a house near by.

A dime caused him to become at once the property of the detective. Had he seen the boy with the trunk? Sure, but he hadn't lamped no Dago nor any other kind of a piker. Did he know the boy? No, he did not know him, but he was sure he didn't live in that neighborhood. "He's a Nort' Sider, mister," he said.

"What makes you think so?"

"'Cos he kep' a-whistlin' 'Higher Water.' Dat's Nort' Side. Over here we's out o' dat. We's graduated. Dat's on de pig."

Nick could not extract anything further from the lad, and, leaving him, went to all the auto offices and stands. Having obtained satisfactory answers to his questions, he proceeded to the City Hall. The chief of police was in his office and welcomed Nick with effusion. "I have been expecting you for the last hour," he said. "Sit down, have a smoke, and tell again your ghastly story. The Mafia must have it in for you as well as the Alansons."

"Before I start in, chief," said Nick, "I desire to know what your office has done this morning."

"The best detectives on the force are out now trying to locate the scene of the murder, and also find the remaining portion of the body of the victim. They started out in accordance with your suggestion, to make a tour of the lodging houses in the vicinity of Garfield Park."

"Then there is nothing to do but wait for their report." The great detective had told his story over the phone, but, as it had been brief, he now gave all the details. He described his meeting with Rupert Alanson, and repeated the strange story which that young man had told. "I could not get a very good description of this Palazzo," said Nick. "He is tall, fine-looking, with black hair, black eyes and so forth. Scores of good-looking Italians in the city would answer the description of the man who must be the murderer."

"We haven't had any clash with the Mafia for a year," said the chief, "and I had been congratulating myself that I had taught the branch here such a lesson that the members would think twice before committing any more outrages. The murder last night, according to your story, Nick, was the work of a member from Sicily, and it is possible that he has not as yet made his presence known to the Chicago branch. He may have concluded to carry out his murderous instructions alone, as a matter of safety, for he probably knows that last year a member of the Mafia here turned traitor. It was through

this fellow that I was enabled to break the backbone of the organization. Since then the branch may, and probably has, recruited its ranks."

"You may be right, chief," said Nick, "and there's a circumstance that seems to support your idea. At an auto stand on Randolph Street I learned that an Italian, who might, from the description, be Palazzo, has been a continuous patron of the auto firm for the past ten days. If he is the man who has taken these long, daily rides over the same route, then it might be presumed that he has been relying solely on his own resources in searching for the Alansons. If, upon his arrival here, he had taken the Mafia branch into his confidence, it would not have been necessary for him to have made a single inquiry or to have scanned the streets for a sight of either Rupert or Ralph. The Chicago Mafia would have found the Alansons without any difficulty."

"Your idea of sending Alanson off in an auto so as to throw the assassin off the track was a good one, Nick, and I can't, for the life of me, understand how it failed to work. There was no other auto in sight, you say. How, then, could Palazzo have tracked Alanson?"

"He had one chance, and taking it was favored by luck. Lucio Palazza tracked Rupert Alanson by the aid of another auto. When I interviewed the chauffeur at the Randolph Street stand a while ago, I learned that the Italian, whom I assume to have been Palazzo, made his last auto trip last evening. At the time of my conversation with Rupert Alanson in the park, the auto, subject to the Italian's orders, stood on Wabash Avenue, near Jackson Boulevard. The Italian, concealed near the corner of Michigan Avenue and the boulevard, saw his prey go off in the auto, and guessing that a temporary place of concealment in the outskirts had been planned for Alanson, instantly sought the auto he had engaged and gave pursuit in the only practicable way. Instead of following Alanson's auto along Michigan Avenue and the other thoroughfares of the drive which encircles the city, he ordered his chauffeur to spin up Jackson Boulevard to Garfield Park. There is a straight shoot along the boulevard to the park, and the distance is not more than one-fourth of that which Alanson's auto would have to cover to make the same point. Of course Palazzo must have expected that Alanson would not leave the auto before reaching the park. The place is in the western outskirts and is just the spot at which to alight and look for a lodging house. So, you see, that although Alanson had a good start, Palazzo could easily have reached Garfield Park ahead of him. If it shall be found that the murder was committed in a house near the park, or in the park itself, then I shall consider that my theory has been confirmed."

"We may receive a report at any moment, Nick. By the way, my dear fellow, you must take care of yourself. If you stay in Chicago and go into this case, your life will be in danger."

"My life has been in danger many times, chief," responded the detective, gravely, "and yet, somehow or other, I have always managed to win out. As for leaving Chicago, that is not to be thought of."

"I know it," said the chief, "and I know that if there is a man in the world able to cope with the Mafia, you are he."

"If Palazzo keeps away from the local branch the fight may not be a hard one."

"He will find allies, though, be sure of that. Your enemies in the criminal world will rally to his support."

"Perhaps. I know the head of Rupert Alanson was sent to me as a warning that I must keep my hands off or I would meet the same fate that befell Alanson. Well, I am glad of one thing. I know how I stand. The declaration of war has been made. With me it is 'No surrender.'"

A detective entered as Nick finished speaking. He was laboring under strong excitement, but he smiled and held out his hand when he saw Nick. "You are here at the right time," he said. Then he turned to the chief. "We have found the headless trunk and limbs," he announced, "and know where the murder was committed."

"Good," exclaimed the chief, in high satisfaction. "Tell us all about it."

"The deed was done in a little summerhouse in the garden at the rear of a lodging house on one of the streets near Garfield Park."

CHAPTER III.

THE SINGED HAIRS.

"In making the search," said the detective, whose name was Lampson, "we divided the locality into sections. Dithrow's section included the summerhouse, and I, having exhausted my section, was with him when the horrible discovery was made. At the lodging house in front we learned that a young man answering Alanson's description had appeared there last evening about half-past nine o'clock, and had applied for a night's lodging. The house was full, the landlady informed him, but there was a cot in the summerhouse in the rear if he cared to sleep there. The young man hesitated a moment, and then said that, as it was so late, he would have to accept even the poorest accommodation. 'If,' continued the landlady, 'you desire to see the young man, you will doubtless find him in the summerhouse, for the door has not been opened this morning.'

"We went to the summerhouse, reached by way of the side yard and by means of a gate, and knocked at the door. We expected no answer, and, finding the door unlocked walked in. What we saw was an awful sight. The—thing lay upon the floor by the side of the cot, and

there was blood everywhere—on the cot, on the floor and on the walls of the room. The scene sickened me, and I don't feel like describing it in detail."

"You did not disturb anything, did you?" asked Nick, quickly.

"No. We just looked in and then came away. The door is now locked and here is the key."

Lampson handed the key to the chief.

"I am—must go there at once," said the great detective, rising. "Will you come with me, chief?"

"Of course."

The news of the sensational crime had spread, and when Nick and the chief reached the gate of the lodging house they found a large crowd of men, women and children massed on the sidewalk.

Entering the summerhouse, Nick would have turned sick at the gory spectacle the room presented had he not been bracing himself for it. Standing a few moments in the doorway, his sharp glances swept every object. Then advancing, his eye became arrested by blood stains on the white cloth of a little lamp stand. But there was no lamp on the stand. Instead was a candlestick, with a half-burned candle in it. Nick stood by the stand, taking in every detail. Suddenly his nerves began to tingle with excitement. Upon and by the side of the candlestick were human hairs, a large number of them. Some were stuck in the candle drippings, others lay loose on the white cloth. Altogether there were a spoonful of them. Nick gathered them all up and showed them to the chief.

"Singed hairs, eh? The murderer must have got his head too near the candle. Unless the hairs came from the head of the murdered man."

"No," said Nick, slowly, "they are too dark. Rupert Alanson had dark brown, almost black, hair. These hairs are bluish black, a common color among the Italians."

"Going to keep them as a clew?"

"Yes, and also as evidence should Palazzo ever be caught and placed on trial for his life. Both you and I are satisfied that the murderer is Palazzo, but to convict him we must have evidence. Every item that points to him as the criminal must be carefully retained."

The detective next gave his attention to the body. A superficial examination disclosed three knife wounds in the breast, either of which, in Nick's opinion, was sufficient to cause death. Further examination called forth this remark: "The head, chief, was severed with a cleaver, and the murderer was proficient in the use of the weapon. It would not surprise me to learn that at some time in his life he was a butcher." The detective looked for foot tracks in the blood upon the floor, but found none. The bedclothes consisted of a comforter, sheets and a pillow. The comforter was on the floor, and had many blood stains upon it, but there were more stains upon the sheets. Each had been crumpled up and thrown against the wall. After an inspection of the bed, Nick said: "Alanson never went to bed. He had undressed and was about ready to blow out the candle and retire when the murderer knocked at the door. As you will observe, he had taken off his clothes with the exception of one stocking. There are no evidences of a struggle, so the plain inference is that Alanson was taken unawares. Upon entering the room, he must have locked the door. Considering his position, the fear that oppressed him, the locking of the door would immediately follow his entrance into the room."

"But the door was not forced. Where, then, was the murderer's opportunity for a surprise?" queried the chief.

"Deception gave him the opportunity. I can account for his entrance and his attack in no other way. I have an idea, fortified by the act which sent that ghastly head to my room this morning, that Palazzo knows me. He was probably sometime in New York before coming on to Chicago, and as it was undoubtedly his desire, in the devilish game he was playing, to fight shy of the law's officers, it would naturally occur to him to learn something about the personnel of both the public and private detective forces of the metropolis. Although I am seldom without a disguise, I have no doubt that this sharp rascal succeeded in spotting me. But he could not find the Alansons in New York and so came to Chicago. Imagine his astonishment when he saw me talking with Rupert Alanson. He then knew that he would have to reckon with me, yet such was his confidence in his own powers that he did not hesitate in the murderous program he had mapped out. But one change, or, rather, one addition, was made. My name went on his black list.

"My long talk with Alanson, chief, must have convinced Palazzo that I had been put in possession of all the facts relating to the Alansons' Sicilian troubles and the murderous plans of the Cosca, and he would, therefore, infer that Rupert, in going off in the auto, was acting in accordance with my instructions and that I had arranged to meet the young man in the morning."

"The discovery of your presence in Chicago, Nick, probably caused him to hasten his preparations for the murder."

"Perhaps; though I believe he intended to kill the Alansons at the first favorable opportunity. Now as to Palazzo's actions at the summerhouse. He traced Rupert Alanson to the place, and, instead of waiting for his victim to retire and then forcing an entrance, he knocked at the door while the young man was undressing and while the candle was burning. It is not likely that Alanson would have opened the door if he had not supposed that he was opening it to a friend. I believe that Palazzo used my name. He may not have tried to imitate my voice, but he could have spoken in a whisper.

have said that he was Nick Carter come on most urgent business. The young man, filled with the terrors of his situation, having so recently talked with me, at the time being under my orders, and without the caution and the penetration that comes from experience, probably opened the door and was instantly attacked. Taken by surprise, Alanson could make no defense. Death came in a moment."

The coroner arrived at this juncture, and after he had explored the pockets of the coat and trousers of the murdered man and had announced that no valuables—watch, jewelry or money—had been found, Nick said: "An explanation of the presence of the hairs on the candlestick and stand is, I think, now afforded. Palazzo, after securing the pocketbook and purse, went to the light to ascertain the character and value of the plunder. In his excitement and nervousness, he placed his head too near the flame, and, as a result, left behind evidence that may assist in convicting him if ever he should be captured."

Before an hour had elapsed Nick had secured all the evidence it was then possible to obtain. From the patrolman of a section of the park beat he learned that at an hour before daybreak the officer had seen a wagon leave the corner of the park, from which several hours later the trunk had been removed. The patrolman was at some distance away when the wagon was driven off, and gave little thought to the circumstance. How long the wagon had stopped at the corner he could not say, but as he had not been out of sight of the spot for more than ten minutes at a time, the period must necessarily have been short.

"What kind of a wagon was it?" asked Nick.

"It looked like a small express wagon."

"Was there more than one person on the seat?"

"I was too far away to notice."

"Trying to locate that wagon and that driver is like searching for a needle in a haystack," remarked the chief. "Still, the search must be made."

After orders to this effect had been given, Nick and the chief walked over to the park. In the shrubbery near the corner where the wagon had stopped, Nick pointed out a spot where the grass lay flat and matted, as if something heavy had but recently reposed there. The chief knelt down, and quickly spoke: "There are blood marks on the grass. Here is where the murderer temporarily concealed his ghastly burden."

"Yes," returned Nick, "that is the place. I now understand how Palazzo operated. You will remember, chief, that the only covering for the bed in the summer-house was a comforter. There should have been a blanket. The absence of the blanket is easily accounted for. The murderer wrapped the severed head in it. Then, when the coast was clear—the patrolman at the remote end of his beat—Palazzo slipped out of the yard and hurried over to the park. Here in the shrubbery he concealed the head, and then hastened to procure the services of a confederate."

"The driver of the express wagon?"

"Yes. He must have originally planned to carry out his scheme of retaliation in the way it was accomplished, and have made provision for every detail. The driver had been engaged beforehand, had been instructed to be ready at a moment's notice. Believing that the discovery of the murder would not likely be made before the middle of the forenoon, Palazzo reckoned that he would have plenty of time in which to make a fiendish disposition of the head, and also cover up his own tracks. He came with the driver, and the wagon brought the trunk. Having placed the head in the trunk, and addressed the trunk to me, Palazzo and his confederate drove off. The boy was next secured, and he carried out his part in accordance with his instructions. It is well enough to order a systematic search, in order to learn where Palazzo roomed last night, but I fear the discovery, when made, will profit us little, for the murderer has, of course, changed his residence."

"Do you not fear that he will leave Chicago?" asked the chief.

"No," answered Nick. "But half his hellish work has been done. Ralph Alanson must die as his brother has died, and perhaps Palazzo may try to make me turn up my toes. Therefore, he will stay in Chicago."

"It would be a good plan to try to track the trunk to the place where it was purchased."

"Yes; I have thought of that, but it will be a waste of time to try to get the clew in Chicago, for the trunk was bought outside of this city. Although the place, name of company and so forth had been scraped off, there were left plain evidences on the trunk of its having passed through the hands of more than one transfer agent. I believe the purchase was made in New York, for there is where Palazzo landed after crossing the ocean, and there is where he began his search. Chick and Patsy are now on the way here, and I'll have Ten-Ichi take up the trunk matter."

After a further talk with the chief, Nick went to his room in the hotel, and donned a disguise which would have deceived the most astute criminal in the country. He had plenty of disguises from which to make a selection, but on this occasion he chose to depart from the usual course by accepting the assistance of a member of the company then playing a cowboy piece at one of the theaters. Nick had known Buck Lawler for many years, and knew him for a thoroughbred. The fact that Lawler and several other members of the troupe were staying at the hotel, and that they wore all the time their suits of buckskin and their cowboy hats gave him the inspiration upon which he acted. To Lawler he confided his plan, and at once secured willing co-operation.

Shortly before noon there appeared an addition to the cowboy force in the hotel billiard room, and when Buck and Nick came out upon the sidewalk no one not in the secret would ever have supposed that one of the two was an imitation plainsman. Together they strolled first up and then down the avenue. Finally they separated at the Illinois Central Railway Station, Nick taking a cab and Lawler walking back to the hotel. As it was about train time, any person watching the two men from the avenue would have supposed that one had gone off by train, and that the other had bid him good-by.

Nick left the cab on North Ashland Avenue, and, after walking a few blocks, turned into a side street, and presently ascended the steps of a modest dwelling. Ralph Alanson lodged here, and Ralph Alanson was in. When Nick saw the brother of the dead Rupert he was startled at the resemblance. They were as like as two peas, though Ralph was the younger by three years. After the detective had introduced himself, Ralph, who was trembling with anxiety, asked, quickly:

"Where is Rupert?"

Nick Carter performed his painful task as briefly and as gently as possible. But it was a horrifying tale, and the effect upon the listener may be imagined. For some time he spoke not a word. Then, pulling himself together, he said, in a voice hoarse with vindictive passion:

"As he served Rupert, so shall he be served! I now live but for one object—to make Lucio Palazzo suffer the tortures of the damned, and then kill him!"

It was some time before Nick could make Ralph Alanson listen to reason. "We must exercise caution," the detective said. "We must oppose cunning with cunning, and play a waiting game, or this fiend will slip through our fingers."

"I don't like to wait!" said the young man, in fierce impatience. "Waiting may permit him to escape from Chicago."

"He will not leave Chicago," replied Nick, with positiveness; "for more than half his work is undone. Now, here is my plan, and, if you will only carry out your part in it, we may catch our man."

The plan was discussed at length, and, to Nick's satisfaction, it met with Ralph Alanson's entire approval. It was late in the afternoon when the detective left the house. He did not at once return to the hotel, but, boarding a trolley, was deposited in front of the theater where the cowboys were playing. There was an afternoon rehearsal in progress, and Nick made his way to the stage, found Buck Lawler, and remained in the building until the rehearsal was over. Then he and Lawler proceeded to the hotel together.

After dinner Nick sought his room. He had not been there more than ten minutes when there was a knock at the door. Nick opened it, and a negro bell boy handed him a note. Without reading it, the detective asked:

"Who gave this to you?"

"De clerk in de office."

"When was it left there? Do you know?"

"De clerk found it on de desk. He dunno who lef' it dar, sah."

Nick tipped the boy, then closed the door and opened and read the note. Its contents did not surprise him.

"Nick Carter," it ran, "if you know when you are well off, you will drop this Alanson case. Take the next train for New York, and you will not be harmed. Stay here, and you are a dead detective."

There was no signature, and the writing, in the vertical style, was like that of a schoolboy. "Palazzo never wrote this," said Nick to himself. "Therefore, it was the work of a confederate, and that confederate is an American. Who is he? The man who this morning acted as the driver of the express wagon? Or has Palazzo enlisted a second man in his service?"

Going to the telephone, the detective requested the immediate presence of the manager of the hotel.

CHAPTER IV.

A TRAP WHICH DID NOT WORK.

"You make frequent changes in your working force, do you not?" said Nick to the manager.

"Yes, Mr. Carter. Like all other first-class hotels, we follow sound business rules. If an employee does not come up to the mark after satisfactory trial, we discharge him and hire some one else."

"Has any change been made within the past twenty-four hours?"

"Yes. One of the porter's assistants was discharged yesterday, and this afternoon I engaged a man in his place."

"Where did you find the man?"

"I generally leave such matters to the porter, but this time the man came into the office and applied for the situation."

"Did he furnish references?"

"To be sure. They were from the Waldorf-Astoria and St. Regis, New York."

"Did you verify them?"

"No. They seemed to be all right; and, besides, I was favorably impressed with the man's appearance, and his services were urgently required at that moment."

"What is he, negro or a white man?"

"A white man, of about forty years of age."

After the new employee's description had been given, Nick said: "The fellow may be all right, and until I have assured you that he is not, and should not be allowed to occupy a false position, I would ask that he be not disturbed."

The detective made the case clearer, and the manager

went away, giving the assurance that Nick should be permitted to manage the affair of the assistant porter to suit himself.

In the evening the detective, disguised as a bewhiskered lake captain, sauntered into the office, and took a seat near the window. For reasons satisfactory to himself, he had concluded to discard his cowboy disguise. It had served its purpose, and to wear it longer might be an act of danger. From where he sat he could observe the movements of the porter and his assistants. The new man was studied closely. He appeared at intervals, and seemed to be thoroughly at his ease, and to have no mind for anything or anybody outside the limits of his occupation. He never once glanced in Nick's direction. He had a broad, smooth face, prominent cheek bones, small, sharp, black eyes and shaggy eyebrows. His shoulders were massive, and he had a bull neck, and walked with a slight stoop.

"Where have I seen that man?" thought Nick, as he wrinkled his brows. "The face is familiar, but I can't seem to place it."

The porter spoke to the man, giving some order. "All right, sir," was the reply. At the voice, heard for the first time, the detective's eyes brightened. He knew the man. Years before, a series of daring stage robberies had been committed in California. The operators were two brothers named Rolles, and several murders had been added to the robberies. Wells, Fargo & Co., the principal sufferers, had called upon Nick Carter to assist the company's force of detectives. Nick succeeded in arresting one of the brothers, and he was hanged for his crimes. The other brother escaped. Nick had seen him once, and only once. While trailing the robbers, the detective had come upon their place of concealment, a deserted barn near the town of Shasta. By means of a convenient knothole, he had looked upon the faces of the brothers, and had heard them speak. One—the man now peaceably occupied as a hotel porter—had a voice like that of a child, and, if Nick had not had his eyes on the speaker, he would have supposed that he was listening to the talk of a boy not over seven years of age. There were a number of the company's detectives concealed near the barn, and during the fight which followed Nick's discovery Jim Rolles took to the brush and made his escape. Seeing him now, Nick believed that the man had no idea that his face was known to the detective who had led the band of officers which had captured Bill Rolles. Years had passed since the California raids, Jim was several thousand miles from the scenes of robbery and bloodshed, and, therefore, he might regard himself as safe from discovery.

At eight o'clock Jim Rolles left the hotel, his duties for the day being over. Nick determined to follow him. The fact that Rolles was an outlaw, wanted in California for murder, coupled with the further fact that he had taken service at the hotel immediately before the warning note to Nick had been placed on the clerk's desk, warranted the belief that he was Palazzo's chief confederate. While Nick felt that it was his duty to arrest Rolles for the California crime, he resolved to defer the arrest until he should have made use of the man as an unconscious guide to the hiding place of the murderous Sicilian. Rolles walked rapidly after leaving the hotel. Nick shadowed him to State Street, and there saw his quarry jump into a cab. Nick found another cab, and kept up the pursuit. After about fifteen minutes ride, the cab which had Rolles as a passenger stopped in front of a large, imposing dwelling, near Humboldt Park, and the California outlaw stepped out, paid the cabman and went quickly up the steps of the mansion. Soon he disappeared within, while Nick, at the next corner, emitted a whistle of surprise. The detective had expected that his man would land in some shady quarter of the city. Instead, here he was inside of one of the handsomest dwellings of an aristocratic section. Alighting from the cab, and dismissing the driver, Nick Carter readjusted his thinking cap. He felt that he was on the verge of an important discovery. A patrolman stood by the curb across the street. Nick went over and accosted him.

"Can you tell me who lives there?" pointing to the house into which Rolles had gone.

"A high-toned foreigner, the Marchese Del Fiori."

"An Italian, of course? Has he lived there long?"

"About a year."

"Does he hold any official position under the Italian government?"

"No; but he is hand-in-glove with all the big guns. Must have a pot of money as well as a title."

"Is he a man of family?"

"Sure. There's the marchesa and a couple of daughters."

"How about visitors? Does he have many?"

"The house is full all the time. Every Italian of note who comes to Chicago is gathered in by the marchese. One came yesterday."

Nick Carter's interest was increased.

"Who is he? Do you know him?"

"He's a count, that's all I know."

There was a moment's silence. The patrolman looked Nick over, with suspicion in his eyes. "It appears to me that you are mighty inquisitive," he said. Nick smiled. Then he lowered his voice, and for some minutes spoke rapid and earnestly. The patrolman nodded his head.

"You may count on me," he said, "for there is not a man on the force who would not go through fire and water to serve Nick Carter. We will never forget your rescue of Tim Burke from that burning building."

The patrolman had reference to an act of heroism which Nick had performed two years before while at work on a bank robbery case. Burke had assisted him,

and, while chasing the robber through one of the large buildings on Dearborn Street, the robber had set fire to it, and imperiled the lives of the pursuing officers. Nick could easily have saved himself, but he would not leave Burke behind. At the risk of his life, he had rescued his assistant from a position of deadly peril.

The conversation proceeded, with more freedom and with a perfect understanding.

"I may as well tell you, Mr. Carter," said the patrolman, "that I am acquainted with one of the maids in the marchese's establishment. She speaks English as well as I do, and, if you want further information about the house, she will get it for me. There is one thing I can tell you now. To-morrow night there is to be a swell blowout—a reception, with a dance—to some Italian diplomats from Washington."

The great detective's eyes glistened. "It is probable that I know some of them. In that case——"

"You will be there, eh?"

"Perhaps."

Nick waited in the vicinity for several hours. At last, almost satisfied that Rolles had entered the house for an all-night's stay, he started to return to the hotel. While waiting on Chicago Avenue for a car, a man rapidly approached, coming from the direction of the marchese's house. As he came nearer, Nick saw that he was Jim Rolles. Stopping in front of the detective, he said, in his childish voice: "About time for the car, isn't it?"

"Yes," was the answer, in the gruff tone of a lake captain.

Rolles looked at the disguised man hunter for a moment, then said, seriously:

"I am ready to show my hand, Mr. Carter."

To say that Nick was surprised would but mildly express the state of his feelings at this wholly unlooked-for speech. But his countenance was like that of a mask, as he replied:

"Haven't you made a slight mistake, young man?"

"Oh, no," said Rolles, confidently; "for there is no room for a mistake. I knew the face of every guest at the hotel, and, when you came in the office this evening, although I did not then suspect you, I was yet aware of the fact that you were not registered in the character of a black-whiskered sailor."

He paused, chuckled, and then went on:

"When you followed me, I knew you were Nick Carter."

"If you knew I was following you, why did you go into the house of the Marchese Del Fiori?" questioned Nick, with a sharp look at Rolles' face.

"I did not get onto you until after I had gone into the house. Then I piped you off from an upstairs window. You stood for some time under the electric light, talking with that patrolman."

"Well," said Nick, coldly, "now that you have found me, what do you want of me?"

The tone seemed to imply that the detective was not aware of the identity of the man before him. It was, therefore, with more confidence that Rolles proceeded.

"I want to make a change of bosses," he said. If the outlaw was shamming, he was a good actor, for he spoke with every appearance of frankness and sincerity. A car came up to the corner, stopped, and went on again. Nick and Jim Rolles remained standing on the sidewalk. How the adventure would turn out Nick could not guess, but he knew that he stood in a most peculiar situation. His penetrating eyes tried to read the soul of the man who, up to their meeting at least, had been the tool of the fiend in human form who had slain Rupert Alanson.

"Before you give me your confidence," said Nick, "tell me who you are. I have been trying to place you, but can't."

"No; you have never seen me before to-night," returned Rolles, with a smile of satisfaction. "My name is Robinson—Philip Robinson—and I was born in Milwaukee."

"You have lived in New York, though?"

"I have lived in a good many places."

"Have you ever done any hotel work before?"

"Yes. I have done a little of everything."

"All the same, your recommendations were forged."

"I admit it," said Rolles, coolly. "It was in the game."

"I see. Now you may go on with your statement, which, I believe, includes an offer to quit your present employment and come over to my side?"

"You have said it. I have bitten off more than I can chew. Up to an hour ago I thought I was working on an innocent snap. Now I am dead sure that I have gone into something that, if kept up, may land me in the State's prison, perhaps send me to the gallows. I am not a psalm singer, Mr. Carter, but I have never been in prison." As they walked down the avenue, Rolles continued his story. "I want you to get wise on the whole business," he said, "and so I'll begin at the beginning. A fortnight ago I was doing a night stunt at a New York East Side joint—saloon and lodging combination, you understand. One night there was a gang of guns in the barroom, and the talk turned on you. They all jumped on your neck, and I, as a matter of policy, give you a few digs myself. I expect that I went the limit, for, after I walked away from the gang to wait on a customer, a Dago, who had been sitting at a table all by his lonesome, gave me the wink. As soon as I could, I went over to where he sat. He wasn't a bit leery of me, but started right in to give himself away. He wanted a partner for a little job in Chicago, and, from the cut of my jib, he thought I would fill the bill to the queen's taste. He spoke mighty poor English, but he made himself understood, all right. It was a little blackmailing

scheme, he said, and we could easily keep out of the clutches of the officers. I had nothing to say until he unloaded this proposition: He would pay me one hundred dollars a week until the time came to pull the scheme off; afterward, a square divvy. 'I'm with you, old man,' I said, 'if you'll show your good intentions by coughing up a week's salary in advance.'

"The Dago agreed, without a murmur, and next day we left for Chicago. There was nothing for me to do until this morning, when my boss said he wanted you watched. He had found out you were in town, and he was afraid you would drop onto his game. Hence the assistant porter play and my trip to the Del Fiori house."

While Rolles had been talking, Nick had been doing some serious thinking. The situation was growing more acute with every moment. But he gave no sign of anything but eager interest.

"I suppose you want to know why I went to the house?" Rolles continued. "My boss has a woman located there, and I went with a message. As it was possible that I might be followed, I took the precaution to look out of the window after I got into the house. I had the run of the place, for the marchese and his family were at the theater, and only the servants were there."

"What was your message?" asked Nick.

"'Don't fail. I'll be there.'"

"Go on."

"It was while I was in the house that the servants got to talking about the ghastly crime near Garfield Park. One of them had it from a friend on the police force that an Italian was suspected, and that Nick Carter had taken charge of the case. This story set me to thinking good and hard. Might not my Dago be the murderer? He was anxious about you, Mr. Carter, and it occurred to me that his anxiety was caused by your interest in the Alanson case. If my suspicions were based on fact, then I was in a pretty pickle. My hair seemed to stand on end as I thought of the matter. Before I left the house my mind was made up. I would chuck the Dago business and go over to the right—the safe—side. So I followed you, and now I am ready to help you, if you need my help."

"Do you know where your boss may be found?" Nick asked, in simulated excitement.

"Sure."

"And will you pilot me there?"

"Of course I will. I intended to propose doing so."

The detective's eyes twinkled with pleasure. "I am glad you have come over to the side of justice, Mr. Robinson," he said, with an assumption of earnestness and sincerity; "and I desire to thank you from the bottom of my heart for the revelations which you have made."

Jim Rolles' countenance expressed the keenest delight.

"Do you know," he said, "that I feel as happy as a bird. A big load has been taken from my mind. Mr. Carter, you and I will do the trick. Put it there!" He extended his hand, and Nick gave it a grasp that made the bones crack.

"Where is the Dago's crib, Robinson?" the detective inquired, after a pause.

"Near the stock yards."

"Then let's ride."

At Hermitage Avenue they took a car, and, transferring at Halstead Street, rode several blocks. It was at Rolles' suggestion that they left the car. The locality in which they now found themselves was near the river, and, as they walked, Rolles said his employer lived on one of the short streets, not far from the water.

They were in sight of the street, and passing the yard of a foundry, when Nick, wheeling, swiftly struck Rolles a sledge-hammer blow behind the ear. Palazzo's tool fell like a log, and did not move.

The gate of the foundry yard was open, and, after dragging the body inside the inclosure, Nick proceeded to make effective use of cords and a gag. This done, he closed the gate. The body was dragged further from the sidewalk before the detective thought fit to open his mouth. Behind a huge boiler a place suitable for his purpose was found. Nick waited until Rolles showed signs of returning consciousness, and then began what promised to be a most interesting monologue.

CHAPTER V.

NICK MEETS WITH A SURPRISE.

"I don't take any credit for coppering your little game, Robinson," said Nick, "for a child would have seen through it. I am of the opinion that you would never have played it if you hadn't found yourself in a corner. You did not expect to be followed to-night. When you discovered that I was aware of your visit to the marchese's house you knew the game was up unless you could work the original quirk which you afterward attempted. But I had you at a disadvantage all the time, and you did not know it. I knew you were Jim Rolles, stage robber and murderer"—the captive shivered, and would have groaned in an access of despair if he had had opportunity—"and I knew that such a man would not shrink from the commission of any crime the wicked brain of Lucio Palazzo might suggest. So I was never for one moment deceived by your plausible tale. Your play was to get me down by the river, and then, by a sudden attack, silence my mouth at once and forever. You have failed." The gag was removed. "Now, what have you to say for yourself?"

"I say that you are the devil, Nick Carter!" was the savage outburst.

"You have not answered my question," Nick responded, coldly.

"I have nothing to say. Do your worst!" said Rolles,

sullenly. Then he added, in contradiction of his statement of intention: "I'll be hanged any how you fix it. If I escape this Chicago racket, I'll get it in the neck in California."

"You think this Italian boss of yours intends to play you fair, do you?" asked Nick, after a short pause.

"Of course!" in surprise. "Why shouldn't he?"

"Why should he? You are nothing but a tool, to be cast away when you have served his purpose. He would sacrifice you in a moment if he should deem such a course necessary to his own interest."

Rolles shook his head. "You are stringing me," he said. "I know my boss by the book. You know nothing about him, except what you have heard, and you have heard only a little."

"I perceive that your education has been neglected," replied Nick, imperturbably. "I shall have to take you in hand and instill into your mind a few lessons bearing on the subject of human nature."

The detective stooped and carefully inspected the hands of his prisoner. Having verified a suspicion that had entered his mind, he proceeded to explore Rolles' pockets. Among the articles found was a handsome, curiously wrought match safe, finished in Roman gold. There was an inscription which, under the light of Nick's bull's-eye, read, in English, as follows: "Rupert, from Ralph." After replacing the articles in the pockets, the detective said:

"I am going to prove to you that Palazzo intended to put you into a hole. You were hired to perform certain things. These accomplished, you were, if Palazzo's safety demanded it, to be pointed out as the murderer of Rupert Alanson."

"That breeze won't fly a sail!" sneered Rolles. "But speak your little piece. It amuses you, and it can cut no ice with me."

"You may change your tune, Rolles, before I exhaust my budget," returned the detective, coolly. "Now, 'gird up your loins' and listen. You did not meet Palazzo in New York while you were shoveling out booze in an East Side joint. You were a cabman or a hackman, and you belonged to that disreputable class of night birds patronized almost wholly by the criminal element. Palazzo, while on a tour of inquiry, met you. Your recommendations satisfied him. He needed a tool, and you came ready to his hand. How do I know you were a driver of horses? By your hands. There is a calloused ridge extending from the ball of the thumb toward the little finger. Constant gripping of the lines caused the callousness. It could have been made in no other way. How does my deduction strike you?"

Rolles, who had been listening with grownig pallor, tried to speak, but the words died in his throat. But his eyes expressed a variety of emotions, none of them pleasureable ones.

"So you came to Chicago," Nick continued, "in the capacity of a driver of horses, and your first employment was undertaken early this morning, several hours before daybreak. You hauled a trunk to Garfield Park. The trunk may have been yours, it may have been Palazzo's. I am inclined to think, now that I have seen you, that the trunk was yours, and that you brought it from New York. The truth about the matter can be easily ascertained."

Rolles licked his lips, and gazed at the detective as if fascinated.

"You knew that a horrible murder had been committed, and you knew what use was to be made of the trunk. You even shared in the plunder taken from the murdered man's pockets. That match safe was worn in life by its owner, Rupert Alanson."

A deep groan issued from the throat of the prisoner. "I was a blankety blank fool to take it!" he said.

"You never made a truer statement in your life," said Nick. "You have been fool as well as knave in all this business. You are doubly a fool for trusting to the promises of one of the greatest villains that ever went unhung. He gave you that match safe. What for? As a partial reward for your services? Not by an overwhelming majority. He gave it to you for the purpose of destroying you. There are sharp detectives in this city, and, had I not come on the scene, the discovery of your work early this morning would have been made. You would have been arrested, and the finding in your pocket of that match safe would have so closely connected you with the murder that your conviction would have certainly followed. You could not, in your own interest, have told the truth, for the truth would have been fatal to your defense. A lie would not have benefited you, for it would have been exposed. So you see how you stand."

Rolles shut his eyes, and tried to conjure up something that might act as oil on his troubled thoughts. He was not a coward, and Nick knew it. And he was not quite the fool that the detective had tried to make him think he was. Nick Carter, with his consummate skill in analysis and deduction, had probed the outlaw's secret connection with the Mafia's agent, and there was the probability that Lucio Palazzo, shrewd though he was, might soon be caught. Would Palazzo betray him, in any event, whether captured or successful in evading arrest? The question was a perplexing one. Many considerations were involved.

Nick waited patiently for Rolles to speak. At last he said: "Well, what is your conclusion?"

"I shall stand pat!" This with compressed lips and a steady look.

"Very well."

Nick tested the cords, and then walked to the gate and opened it. He was about to blow a whistle for a police man, when he saw one coming toward him. As the

officer drew near, the detective said: "I have captured a man the chief would like to see. I am Nick Carter."

The patrolman started, then held out his hand. As Nick put out his own to grasp it, the club of the patrolman descended, not once, but many times, upon the detective's head. Taken completely by surprise, Nick could make no defense. The first blow, given with all the force of a powerful arm, caused the victim to stagger backward. Those that followed came in swift succession, and stretched Nick senseless upon the ground. After a quick glance up and down the street, the assailant lifted the body of the victim and bore it into the yard. His next action was to bind and gag the unconscious man. After this operation, the gate was closed, and the patrolman began a search of the premises. Coming to the bound outlaw, he gave a grunt of satisfaction. With a knife he cut the cords which bound Rolles' wrists and ankles and assisted the erstwhile prisoner to his feet. "Dat wassa close calla, Jim," he said, in the soft voice of an Italian.

"I should say it was!" replied Rolles, with a shiver. "But how in the name of Moses did you happen to butt in, Palazzo?"

"Supposa dat I tell you?"

CHAPTER VI.

THE MARCHESE'S RECEPTION.

The tall, heavily bearded man in the uniform of the Chicago police who stood by Rolles' side in no way resembled the Italian described by Rupert Alanson. An adept in use of disguises, he had on this night picked upon one best calculated to deceive. If he had opened his mouth in Nick Carter's presence, the trick would instantly have been discovered. Palazzo was too wise for that. Nick Carter had introduced himself. The attack became an immediate necessity.

In his broken English, Palazzo told Rolles how he came to meet Nick Carter. He had instructed Rolles how to act in case the detective should shadow him to the house of the marchese. Nick was to be lured to an unoccupied shanty a block beyond the foundry, and there murdered. Palazzo, having other business, could not be present at the wind up. After Rolles had departed on his mission, the Italian concluded that it would be a risky proceeding to allow Rolles to tackle Nick Carter single-handed. Therefore, he resolved to drop all other business and give sole attention to the case of the detective. He had obtained the uniform at a costumer's, some days before, and donning it, set out for the marchese's house. On the way he saw Rolles and a man—rightly supposed to be Nick Carter—board a car on Chicago Avenue. He was on a cross street, and too far away to attract the attention of the conductor, and so was forced to wait for the next car. Arrived at the unoccupied house near the river, he was both surprised and alarmed to find no one there and no evidence that any person had been there that evening. He hurried to Halstead Street, and was looking anxiously up and down that thoroughfare, in hopes that Rolles and the detective, having taken a roundabout way to reach their destination, would soon appear, when Nick Carter showed himself at the foundry gate. Palazzo knew before the detective opened his mouth that Rolles' plot had failed, and he at once prepared for the encounter.

"Palazzo, you are a pippin!" exclaimed Rolles, admiringly. "If I had your head, I'd give a million plunks!"

The Italian shrugged his shoulders. "Eet is nota so bad," he said, lightly, "buta eet will nota feel safe until I taka a life of that devil, Neeck!"

"What are you going to do with him?"

Palazzo's reply was that, as he did not desire to add volume to the hue and cry against him, he must see that the body of his enemy was put where it would not likely be discovered for many days. "I hava de ide!" he said. "Somesin' mus' be there."

The body of the detective was lifted up and conveyed to the door of the foundry. It was insecurely locked, for there was nothing portable inside that would appeal to the covetousness of any thief. The office, a small, brick structure, fronted the street, and was at some distance from the shop door.

An entrance effected, Palazzo ordered Rolles to remain with the body while he made an investigation of the several rooms of the foundry. He was gone about ten minutes, and returned rubbing his hands in evil satisfaction.

"Struck it?" asked Rolles.

"Dat's whata! It taka da banan'!"

The explanation of the Italian's find caused Rolles' face to light up in unholy joy. Palazzo, in exploring the rooms, had found in a far corner of the room at the extreme end of the building a large oil tank, such as is used by the railroads of the West. It was covered with dust, and must have been in its present quarters for many years. It rested upon blocks, about a foot from the floor, so as to protect the valve nozzle at the bottom. Examination showed that it was intact. Why it had remained there so long was a question that did not concern the Italian. It was enough for him to know that it was there, and that it completely answered the purpose which he desired to carry out. The great detective, now conscious, but with an aching head, listened to the conversation between the two villains, and knew that some awful fate had been prepared for him. And he could do nothing. It was impossible to free himself from the cords, adjusted by a past master at the business, and, with a sigh of regret over work undone, he made up his mind to die.

Palazzo had a bull's-eye, and he led the way to the corner where the tank was located, supporting Nick's head with one arm, while Rolles took hold of the feet. Be-

fore the big oil receptacle the painfully animate body of the detective was placed, while Palazzo proceeded to make ready for the crowning act in his fiendish play. Some trouble was experienced in removing the cap of the dome head, or manhole, for it worked by a screw, and had not been touched for a long time. But Palazzo was strong, and with the bar leverage, by which the screw was worked, at last succeeded in uncovering the hole. The opening was over two feet in diameter. Descending to the floor, Palazzo announced his satanic program. The detective was to be placed, alive, in the tank; the dome was to be closed, the safety valve shut, and the tank the same as hermetically sealed. Rolles gave his approval of the plan by dancing a jig in front of the helpless victim. By the aid of boxes, the detective was lifted to the top of the tank and lowered into the manhole. Holding Nick by the shoulders until his head was on a level with the roof of the tank, Palazzo gave a quick, forceful shove, and the detective fell heavily, at full length, on the bottom. He was not stunned, as the fall was short, but for a moment or so his head tingled with pain. When the cap of the dome had been screwed in place, the safety valve attended to, and the boxes had been removed, the Italian sat down on a trestle, and laughed, softly.

But Rolles was trembling in nervous uneasiness.

"Come, Palazzo," he said, "let's get out of here. We have done the job; now let's hike to a safe place."

"Alla right, Jim," and the Italian, arising, moved away from the corner. An hour later, in a room in a building in the outskirts of the city, Palazzo, cigar in mouth and with his feet on the table, spoke as follows, dialect omitted:

"In a way, I am satisfied, but I had planned a different death for Nick Carter. However, he'll not croak without a little suffering. The oxygen in that tank will be exhausted in less than two hours, for there had been no ventilation before I opened the manhole. Then he'll have a little picnic all by himself. He'll suffocate—ha! ha!—and as he vainly struggles for breath he will think of the man whose power he was such a fool to oppose. All his friends will ask, 'Where is Nick Carter?' A search will be made, but it will be fruitless. No one will think of looking into that oil tank, and it may be years before the discovery of his tomb is made. We have done a good night's work, Jim, and my business in Chicago will soon be finished."

"Have you located the other Alanson?"

"No; but he will show up when he finds that his dear friend, the detective, has deserted him. If he does not come out of his hole pretty soon, I'll pull him out by means of a personal in the daily papers."

The talk was carried on for more than an hour. Then the two villains sought their beds.

The inquest over the remains of Rupert Alanson took place next day. Nick Carter was not present, and, for reasons of his own, the chief of police withheld testimony tending to show that the crime had been committed by Lucio Palazzo. A verdict of death at the hands of some person or persons unknown was rendered.

In the evening there was a stream of vehicles going in the direction of Humboldt Park. Their destination was the residence of the Marchese Del Fiori. The mansion was ablaze with light, and from within the sweet strains of a select orchestra drowned the hum of voices. Beautiful women, in evening dress, escorted by dark-faced gallants; haughty matrons, with necks blazing with diamonds; dignified husbands, many of them decorated with the orders of nobility, went up the steps into the spacious vestibule, where, beside a small stand, stood the secretary of the marchese, in the newly imposed rôle of invitation inspector.

Among the last to arrive were a distinguished-looking man of middle age and a tall, handsome young woman, with olive skin and languishing eyes of the darkest blue. Their names, as ascertained by the inspector, were Signor and Signorina Moletto, and to a reporter who was present the information was given that they were father and daughter, and leading members of an operatic company in the city of Milan. They were on intimate terms with the marchese and his family, having begun the acquaintance during one of the yearly visits of the marchese to his native land.

The large reception room was on the first floor. Above, reached by wide stairways on either side of the main entrance and flanked by the library and art rooms and with conservatory at the rear, was the ballroom. The festivities were at their height, when the Signorina Moletto, after a waltz with the handsomest Italian of the assemblage, took the arm of her partner and passed into the conservatory. Her beautiful face was flushed with excitement, and, as she walked, she stole more than one glance at the pale, clear-cut countenance of her escort. He wore neither mustache nor beard, and his black, wavy hair, trimmed but lightly, fell low upon a narrow, white forehead. When his eyes were not on his companion's face they had a cold, sharp gleam in them; but, when they were turned in her direction, they became soft and appealing.

"I never expected to find so much of enjoyment, count," she said, in Italian, and in a deep contralto. "Why, there is as much warmth and sociability here as in my own beloved Milan."

Count Casserta smiled. His heart beat faster. A compliment had been intended, and he assumed that the pleasure she was experiencing had come mainly through his association with her, for he had been her partner in several dances, and she seemed to prefer his society to that of any other man in the assembly. The count was susceptible to female charms. He was aware of this weakness—he called it a weakness—but he made no effort

to combat the fascination which this lovely daughter of sunny Italy had exercised upon him. Rather did he congratulate himself over a situation which might end in marriage.

More than once he bent low his head in conversation, the better to drink in the beauty of those languishing eyes. Whenever he did so, the signorina drew a deep breath, her lips parted and she looked, not straight into his eyes, but above and beyond them. They were chatting agreeably, when Signor Moletto entered the conservatory. His eyes met the signorina's for one short moment, and then he said: "I am sorry to disturb you, Teresa, but your old maestro, Falloni, has just arrived and is dying to see you. The count will excuse you for a short time, I am sure."

Count Casserta bit his lips in angry vexation. He had hoped to enjoy the signorina's society for half an hour more, at least. But he masked his feelings in a pleasant smile and a few courteous words.

At the library door the count parted with his fair companion, after a promise of another waltz had been graciously given. In the library the young singer was brought face to face with an oldish man with a heavy, black mustache, sprinkled with gray. He looked at her admiringly, but not with eyes of recognition.

There were no other persons present in the room but the woman and the two men. As the signorina gazed at the gray-bearded man with a puzzled expression, the signor said, in a low voice:

"This gentleman, Mr. Alanson, is my assistant, Chick. He arrived from New York this forenoon."

The speaker was Nick Carter.

CHAPTER VII.

FROM THE JAWS OF DEATH.

The great detective had emerged from the jaws of death. Left to die in an awful manner, he had yet managed to escape from the oil tank in the foundry, and by his own, unaided, efforts. But for days after his escape the thought of his terrible peril would cause a shiver to pass through his frame.

Trussed, gagged and placed in the tank, his first thought, when the manhole cover had been screwed on and he found himself closed in and in utter darkness, was that escape was an impossibility. The cords which bound his limbs prevented use of either arms or legs. He could move his body by exerting all the power which lay in his shoulders, but that action, he conceived, could avail him nothing. But it was not in Nick Carter's nature to rest supinely and await the coming of death. While a breath remained in his body, while there was intelligence in his brain, he would fight for existence. He could hear, faintly, the voices of his enemies, and, when he judged that they had departed, he began, without plan, to squirm about the tank. There came the first ray of hope when his body touched the iron rod of the tank valve. This rod passed through the tank, with one end in the valve at the bottom and the other attached to the tank dome outside and above. The valve was operated from the dome end. The rod was lifted by means of a button screw, and the lifting permitted the oil to flow into the nozzle at the bottom. The cap of the nozzle removed, the oil poured out and the tank was emptied.

Nick Carter realized that whatever was to be done must be done quickly. The air was close and foul, and the difficulty of breathing was increased by the oppression of the gag. He knew that he could not live under existing conditions more than a few hours. It would not take long to exhaust the oxygen in the air. The end would be a terrible one, for his sufferings would be aggravated by the gag. His imagination pictured the final scene. His struggles, hampered by impeded circulation and respiration, would result in involuntary suicide.

What caused him to hope was the presence of the rod. If he could only work it so that it could be lifted from the valve, he might live to foil the fiend who had planned to murder him in this frightful manner. His hands were out of service, but there were his feet. Bracing himself against his shoulders, he lifted his feet and brought them against the rod. Then, exerting all the strength he could muster, he pressed upward along the rod. The leverage was not very strong—he could bend his knees but slightly—and more than once he despaired of ever succeeding in his purpose. But death was near, his breathing was growing more and more painful, and he redoubled his efforts. Pushing, pushing upward, sometimes losing his hold, and with it the loss of valuable time, he at last felt the rod move. One more effort, in which all his remaining power of muscle was concentrated, and the rod, released from the valve, swung free in the tank. At the same moment, and to Nick Carter's inexpressible delight, the fresh air, in a gentle current, came down the manhole. The safety valve was an adjunct of the tank valve, and the lifting of the rod had released the catch and admitted air into the tank.

Death had been driven away, but for how long? Unless he could devise some means of getting free from his bonds, he might remain in the tank for days, perhaps weeks or months, before the discovery of his presence there would be made. And, when discovery came, it would probably be the spectacle of his dead body which would meet the eyes of the finders. Again his thoughts turned to the rod. There it hung, a few inches from the floor of the tank, still, inanimate, cold, and yet carrying in its metallic heart the means of salvation.

Now, using his wrists, Nick Carter got the end of the rod between them. The cords tightly bound his wrists, but by repeated efforts, by many twists and shoves and by a tightening that caused the cords to cut into his flesh,

with the accompaniment of excruciating pain, he at last succeeded in so loosening them that he was able, by persistent rubbing against the edge of the rod's end, to break them apart and release his wrists. The rest was easy. In less than five minutes after he had regained the use of his hands the detective stood up in the tank, entirely free from bond and gag.

For some time Nick Carter rested. He ached from head to foot, and he was so stiff that he could hardly move. But, in spite of physical discomfort, he felt like singing. He was not yet out of his prison, but he believed that the period of detention would be short. If he could not from the inside twist the screw and remove the cap of the manhole, he could punch a hole in one end of the tank, using the rod as a battering ram. When he had indulged in some necessary calisthenics, he tried the manhole cover. Despite his wonderful power, he could not budge it, from lack of proper purchase. But he had the strength to wrench the rod from its fastening, and, with it in his hands, he struck, with all his force, at one of the cylindrical ends of the tank. The first blow made a dent, the second made a hole. For an hour the detective worked, while the perspiration ran down his face in streams. But victory was finally achieved. Shortly before daybreak Nick Carter, after one of the most terrible experiences of his checkered career, crawled out of the oil tank, a free man once more. There was a water faucet in the foundry yard, near the door, and, after he had allowed the water to play freely upon his head and had bathed his face, he went out of the gate and hastened to a nearby lodging house, where he registered under an assumed name. He was in sore need of rest, but time now had such an important value with him that he left an order to be called at eight o'clock.

At nine-forty-five, disguised as an old, but well-to-do, farmer, Nick was at the railway station on La Salle Street. The Twentieth Century Limited from New York arrived, and Chick and Patsy alighted from one of the Pullmans. The three entered a cab and were driven to a hotel on Quincy Street. In the parlor of the suit engaged for the two assistants Nick told his strange and intensely interesting story, and outlined his plans.

"I believe," said he, "that I will be able to lay my hands on Palazzo to-night, but I do not wish to arrest him until I have secured evidence sufficient to convict him of the murder of Rupert Alanson. The boy who waited at the Garfield Park corner with the trunk must be found. You, Patsy, will attend to that detail. Go to the North Side, and make a quiet, but thorough, investigation. It is not unlikely that the boy has left the city. If he has, find out, if possible, where he has gone. And while you are on this duty, Patsy, try also to discover where the express wagon came from. I believe it started from some point in the North Side, and it may be that you will find it there now. There is no way of identifying it, except through a description of the driver. I have described Jim Rolles, and there's your starter."

When Patsy had gone, Nick addressed himself to Chick.

"I have already arranged with Ralph Alanson for a little game which may work to our advantage. He is an amateur actor, with a weakness for female parts. To-night he will appear at the reception to be given at the residence of the Marchese Del Fiori, if I shall succeed in handling the preliminaries. I do not know the marchese, but he is everywhere highly spoken of. I must work my points by the aid of the chief of police. He, of course, knows the marchese, and I shall ask him to arrange it so that I may have an interview with the marchese this afternoon."

"You'll want me in the racket, I suppose?" said Chick.

"Yes. You have a part to play, and it's a leading one. I am anxious to meet a certain Count Casserta, who, I hope, will be at the reception."

"Who is he?"

Nick looked at his assistant, and smiled. "I believe he is a bogus count, and that in some way he has succeeded in imposing upon the credulity of the marchese. He may, however, be a real count, for there are titled members of the Mafia."

"I see," remarked Chick. "The count is Lucio Palazzo?"

"Without a doubt; and, if he attends the swell function to-night, we will have some sport with him."

"How did you happen to light on him, Nick?"

"Well, when I shadowed Jim Rolles to the house of the marchese I had a hunch that Palazzo was playing a deep game, one that, under ordinary circumstances, would land him high and dry above suspicion. Just what the game was I could only faintly surmise. When, however, I had the talk with the night patrolman, I thought I saw the trick. This Count Casserta had but recently appeared upon the scene in upper tendom. If he were Palazzo, what was his object in playing the count? To dissociate himself from Palazzo, the murderer, of course—to raise himself out of the poisonous mire of Mafiadom and become one of the elect. Who would ever think of looking for the slayer of Rupert Alanson among the friends of the distinguished Marchese Del Fiori?"

"From what you say, Nick, I infer that Palazzo will play a waiting game with Ralph Alanson?"

"Yes. Even if he succeeds in locating Ralph, he will not likely try to take the young man's life until the excitement over the other murder has died down. In my case, however, action had to be taken quickly. And he came near doing me," added the detective, with a slight shudder.

The chief of police was enabled to perform the service Nick desired, and when night came all obstacles in the matter of the reception had been overcome. In the mar-

chese's library, after Nick Carter had assured himself that Count Casserta had gone back to the ballroom, Ralph Alanson, playing the rôle of the Signorina Moletto, was introduced to Chick, represented to the count as the Signorina's Milanese maestro. The conversation that followed was short, but important. While the count was bending over the false signorina, Ralph had made the discovery which Nick had looked for. Much of the hair upon the count's forehead was singed. The singed hairs were not in a mass, for it was evident that some barber had attempted to remove the unevenness which must have showed when the murderer left the scene of his horrible crime.

"Now," said the detective, "I must have some of the hairs from his head which have not been singed, in order to clinch the matter. Then, with the two sets in my possession, I can make a microscopic examination, and prove beyond the possibility of a doubt whether or not all the hairs came from the same head. If it shall turn out as I believe it will, absolute proof that the count and Palazzo are one and the same person, will be furnished. I need that proof before I can act with certainty."

"Do you want me to snip a lock with the scissors?" asked Ralph Alanson.

"You might be able to do this," said Nick, "but it will be risky to attempt it. In case of discovery, you would not only lose your present hold on him, but he would suspect your identity."

"What do you propose?" inquired Chick.

"Something that will strike you as original and as worth the trial. I am here to-night, as you know, as Signor Moletto, lately connected with a Milanese opera company. In about half an hour the marchese will ask me to sing. Of course, I shall consent."

"Consent!" interrupted Chick, gazing at the great detective in blank astonishment. "Why, you don't know a B flat from a hole in the ground!"

"I am not quite so ignorant as all that," replied Nick, sweetly. "I know something of music; but I will confess that I do not know enough, even if I had the voice, to entertain a cultured audience."

"I should remark not!" said Chick, with a grin.

"But," the detective soberly continued, "I am going to make a bluff. The bluff, however, will not be called. Just as I am about to open my mouth and give my unexcelled baritone an airing, some one under the window will yell 'Fire!' The signorina will faint in the arms of Count Casserta, and the singing stunt will be off."

"Who will do the yelling?"

"A man selected by the chief of police. The signal will be the close of the prelude by the accompaniest, Signorina Moletto."

"Good—very good," commented Chick. Then he asked: "When does the hair cutting come in?"

"While we are all at the piano. As I said, the signorina will be the accompaniest. Count Casserta will turn the music, or, rather, will be in position to do so. You will take your position by my side and behind the count. While the signorina is playing the prelude, you will proceed to get in your fine work on the count's head."

Chick expressed himself as satisfied with the plan. They soon left the library, and at the time appointed the marchese called upon Signor Moletto for a song. Nick smilingly stepped forward to the low platform at the rear. Accompanying him came Signorina Moletto, the accompaniest, Count Casserta and the signorina's former maestro. The night was warm, and all the windows were open. The piano stood in a corner, the conservatory on one side. A few feet from the piano was a window overlooking the rear premises of the mansion. When he reached the platform, the detective walked to the window, apparently for the purpose of inhaling a breath of the fresh air. He was there but a moment; long enough, however, to observe the figure of a man under one of the trees near the building.

Advancing to the piano, the pseudo Signor Moletto squared his shoulders, threw out his chest, coughed slightly, and then waited for the prelude. The signorina, at the piano, struck the opening notes, and the maestro—otherwise Chick—removed from his breast the hand which held a small pair of scissors. According to arrangement, he stood behind the count, whose curly, black hair seemed to invite the coming operation. The prelude was half finished when Chick acted. So swiftly and deftly was the work done that no one of the audience in front of the piano observed it. The count never turned his head, nor gave evidence in any way that he was aware that the operation had been performed.

Before the prelude ended, and after Chick had executed the commission which had been intrusted to him, Count Casserta leaned forward and glued his eyes to the head of the accompaniest. Just before the last note was sounded he straightened up, gave one sharp glance at Signor Moletto, who was then gazing at the ceiling, with the wrapt expression of a self-conscious artist, and then assumed his former attitude. Nick, out of the tail of his eye, caught the glance, and believed that the count had made a discovery which had aroused his suspicions.

The situation had now become a delicate one. If the count did suspect that he was surrounded by enemies, the carrying out of the program, which would presently embrace the sham alarm of fire, must add force to those suspicions. But it was too late to make a change.

The music ceased, and instantly from the yard below came the cry of "Fire!" The greatest commotion followed. Signorina Moletto arose from her seat, glanced wildly about her, then swayed, and would have fallen had not Count Casserta caught her in his arms. In the confusion, and amid the screams of the women, who imagined that the mansion was on fire, the count bore the

seemingly unconscious woman to the ladies' dressing room. Nick and Chick, the former with a grave countenance, saw them pass from sight, and then withdrew to the library. On their way they saw that the excitement was subsiding, the marchese having succeeded in convincing the guests that it was a false alarm.

In the library Nick spoke rapidly. "The count smells a rat," he said, "and, therefore, we must close in to-night. There is a powerful microscope in the marchese's room downstairs, and it will take but a short time to compare the hairs. While I am away, keep a sharp eye on the count. The marchese has been posted, and, if the count attempts to leave the house, arrest him. The marchese will furnish all the help you may want."

"Why not arrest him now?" suggested Chick.

"Because of the one chance in a hundred that he is not Palazzo. If he should be arrested, and it should turn out that he is really Count Casserta, and not the murderer of Rupert Alanson, I would not only be mulcted in heavy damages, but my reputation would be tarnished. I can't afford to take any chances. I must be sure that he is the man I am after."

"Forgive me, Nick," said Chick, apologetically. "I ought to have remembered that your motto was the motto of Davy Crockett, 'Be sure you're right, then go ahead.'"

"Precisely. While I feel satisfied that the count is Palazzo, I must have the proof before I shall be ready to place my hand on his shoulder and say, 'I want you. You are the Curatola of the Cosca.' I had hoped to have some help from Ralph Alanson. But he cannot swear that the count is his Sicilian enemy. He saw Palazzo but once, and then under conditions which will prevent a recognition here to-night. Palazzo at the meeting in Italy was roughly dressed, was sunburned and wore long hair and a heavy mustache. The count has a pale olive complexion, is smoothly shaven, and his hair is much shorter than the hair the Curatola wore in Sicily. So you can understand the situation, Chick."

No more was said. Nick hurried away, after he had made sure that the count was still in the building.

Chick took a position near the ladies' dressing room. In a little while the signorina came out, and was met by the count, who solicitously asked how she was feeling.

The signorina glanced in Chick's direction, as she replied: "I am better, thank you. I am ashamed to have displayed such weakness."

The words were spoken in Italian, but Chick, who possessed a smattering of nearly all the modern languages, understood what was said. He did not propose, however, to air his knowledge of Italian in the presence of the count. As the maestro he must play the part of dignified silence, except when spoken to, when he could respond in gruff monosyllables.

There was a crowd about the dressing room, and this was an advantage. Chick could keep in the background, and his failure to approach the signorina and inquire concerning her health would not be commented upon.

Soon the crowd dispersed, and Chick saw the count and the signorina move toward the wide doorway, which was the main entrance from the corridor above the stairs. He followed them, at a discreet distance, wondering what the movement meant.

Down the stairs went the count and the signorina, proceeding along the passage which led to the front entrance and the vestibule. Chick, at the top of the stairs, beckoned to the marchese, who was in the ballroom doorway, and then hastened after the count and his charge. The two were in the vestibule when Chick entered it. The signorina was speaking, and Nick Carter's assistant heard, with amazement, these words: "I live on Potomac Avenue"—giving the number—"and, though I am sorry to leave without speaking with my father, yet I am sure your explanation, when you return, will satisfy him."

Their backs were toward him, and before they could change their position Chick was concealed behind a large statue on a pedestal in a corner of the vestibule. What did the words mean? Chick's bright brain, working like lightning, quickly found a plausible explanation. Ralph Alanson, unaware that the count entertained any suspicion of the truth, had resolved to return home, taking the count with him as escort. The vindictiveness of the Italian in his nature had been fiercely aroused at the meeting with the man who, he believed, had murdered his brother, and, regardless of the promise made to Nick Carter, he had made up his mind to act for himself. It was Chick's belief that Alanson intended, when he should reach his home, to act as his brother's avenger.

"My God!" thought the young detective, as the count and the false signorina started to leave the vestibule; "this will never do! If they go away together, the ghastly crime near Garfield Park may be repeated!"

The marchese and three officers in plain clothes appeared in the vestibule. Chick spoke a few words, and the party hurried out of the mansion. The count and Ralph Alanson were on the sidewalk in front of a cab, and the cabman was in the act of swinging open the door.

At the sound of the footsteps of Chick and his allies, the count turned. Instantly he drew a knife, plunged it deep into the breast of the young man in woman's dress, gave a sharp command to the cabman, jumped in the cab, and the horses were started.

CHAPTER VIII.

PATSY'S FIND AT LA PORTO.

Count Casserta's movements were so sudden that he was in the cab before Chick could take the offensive. Out came his revolver, and shot after shot was poured into the

cab. The officers and the marchese took a hand, but, though the fusillade was sharp and constant, the cab did not stop, and it was turning a corner before Chick, in another cab, was in pursuit. In the moments that succeeded the beginning of the battle no one had paid any attention to the prostrate form on the sidewalk. The marchese was bending over the body of Lucio Palazzo's last victim when Nick Carter came running down the steps. One of the officers hurriedly told him what had happened. The great detective was horror-stricken. He blamed himself for not acting before. Better to have chanced an ignominious defeat than to have left the way open for such a move on the part of the enemy. But at the words uttered by the marchese, "He is alive," his cooler reason returned. He found justification for the action he had taken. All would have gone well if Ralph had carried out strictly the orders that had been given him. From his late talks with the young man, Nick had no reason to suppose that Alanson would try to change the program.

While the wounded man was being conveyed into the house, Nick used the phone to summon a physician, and also to notify the chief of police of what had happened, and to suggest that all the members of the force that could be spared should be turned loose on the trail of the assassin.

Ralph Alanson was insensible when he was lifted from the sidewalk, but he was conscious before the doctor arrived. The professional examination of the wound called forth this opinion: "The heart has not been touched, and, unless unforeseen complications appear, the young man will live."

Nick Carter showed relief at these words.

"He has everything in his favor," the doctor went on. "He has a rugged constitution; he is—or was—in the pink of health, and he has not been dissipating."

Believing that Chick would report first at the marchese's house, Nick resolved to wait there for an hour, at least. Before the expiration of that time Nick's assistant returned. His face expressed profound disgust. "Lost him," he said, "and just when I expected to overhaul him."

"Maybe he is dead," said Nick.

"No such luck. I put enough shots into that cab to have killed a dozen curatolas, but I didn't fetch Mr. Palazzo. He was under the seat, of course."

"Did you see him while you were in pursuit?"

"I saw his hand. He waved it toward me in farewell," answered Chick, with a sour look. "I sent a bullet after him, but he was out of range."

"You must have met with an accident on your trip," remarked Nick, in sympathetic appreciation.

"Funny kind of an accident," grunted the sorely disappointed Chick. "I'll tell you how it was. I chased Palazzo's cab for about a mile, and finally got within shooting distance. I yelled to Palazzo's driver that I would bore a hole in his head big enough to shove my hand in unless he slowed up and allowed me to tackle his fare. What do you think the piker did?"

"Gave you the ha! ha! I suppose," answered Nick.

"He turned in his seat and let drive with a revolver. If he had fired at me, I would not have any kick coming. But he didn't. He plunked the horse my cabman was driving, and down the animal went, with a bullet in his head. That stopped the funeral. When I got out of the cab, Palazzo and his outfit could not be seen. That murderous cabman must have been a confederate of the Italian."

"Of course he was, Chick! And his name is Jim Rolles."

The next morning the cab which had taken Palazzo from the marchese's house was found on Michigan Avenue. The horse was secured to a hitching post, and bore outward evidence of having been driven long and furiously. Later in the day it was discovered that the cab and horse had been stolen the evening before from in front of a residence in the southern part of the city. The cabman had been sandbagged, and was in the hospital, hovering between life and death.

During the day Nick, Chick and the police and detective forces of Chicago went on a hunt for Palazzo and Rolles. Night came without any information of value having been obtained. The news from the marchese's house was encouraging. Ralph Alanson had passed a good day, and the doctor was more hopeful than ever.

Nothing had been heard of Patsy since he had departed on his mission the day before.

"The boy has struck something, I'll bet a walnut," said Nick to Chick, when they were in Chick's room in the Quincy Street hotel.

"He has probably lit on the boy who was with the trunk."

Chick's guess was correct. The two detectives were still talking when Patsy appeared. With him was a lad of thirteen or fourteen, with a thin face and a pair of sharp, knowing eyes.

"Got him at La Porte, on the Lake Shore Road," Patsy modestly announced. "He did not want to come back with me at first, but I finally persuaded him that it was the proper thing to do."

"Has he told you his story?"

"Only a little of it. He said he'd tell it all to Nick Carter."

"Which is Nick Carter?" asked the boy, looking from Nick to Chick, and from Chick to Nick.

"This one," said Patsy, pointing.

The sharp eyes glistened in wonder and admiration. "Gee!" he ejaculated. "It's me to der front, all right!"

"What is your name?" asked Nick, kindly.

"Demosthenes P. Q. McGirk. De lads call me Paddy for short."

"Well, Paddy, you are willing to help me, are you not?"

"Crack yer whip, Mr. Carter, and I'll come a-runnin'!"

"You assisted in the transportation of a trunk the other morning, didn't you?"

"Sure shot."

"Who engaged you, and where were you when you were engaged?"

"Me mudder's husban' bossed de engagin'."

"Is your mother alive?"

"No." The boy wiped his eyes with his coat sleeve.

"Was this man your father?"

"Not on yer honey boy!" replied Paddy, almost fiercely. "He's me stepdaddy, an' me mudder trun him out 'cos he never perduced."

"What's his name?"

"Flip Robinson."

"Flip stands for 'Philip,' doesn't it?"

"Wid him it does, I reckon, 'cos he's fillin' up all de time." The boy smiled at his joke, displaying a set of sharp, white teeth.

Philip Robinson was the name Rolles had given Nick on the occasion of the meeting on Chicago Avenue. It was, therefore, probable that Rolles was Paddy's stepfather.

"Where did you meet Robinson?" was the detective's next question.

"I met him on de street, de first time, about a week ago. I hadn't seen him for a year, since de time me mudder died. He gimme a nickel, an' tole me he might have a job for me in a few days. De nex' time I bumps up against him was day before yesterday. He said dat I was to hike up to Garfield Park, to a spot he put me wise on, pull a trunk out of de bushes when no one was rubberin', an' take it to de sidewalk. When I got de trunk out, I was to wait for a transfer wagon. De job was to be done early de nex' mornin'."

"Did you know what was in the trunk?"

"No, nor nothin' 'tall about it."

"Didn't you see that it was addressed to me?"

"I can't read none," answered the lad, shamefacedly.

Nick's heart filled with pity. His tone had been kind up to this time. When he next spoke, it was kinder still.

"How came you to go to La Porte?"

"Me stepdaddy bought de ticket afore I took de job, an' he tole to see de trunk off, den chase for a train an' go to La Porte, where he had staked out a crib for me."

"Did he give you any money?"

What the boy had stated was important as evidence, but Nick was looking for something still more important.

"Sure. I got twenty bones."

"Do you know where your stepfather lodges?"

"Where he bunks? Maybe I do, and maybe I don't."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Cos I don't know for sure. I think he is herdin' wid a Dago."

"Herding with a Dago?" Nick pricked up his ears. Here was a statement that was worth something.

"Yes. I seen him go into a crib t'udder side o' de Oakwoods Cemingtery."

Nick looked at Chick, with dancing eyes. Chick stepped to Patsy's side, and held out his hand. They shook silently. Paddy, pleased at the effect of his statement, grinned from ear to ear.

Asked when he had seen his stepfather and the Italian go into the "crib," the lad made the following explanation: "'Twas in de afternoon when I got de job of herdin' dat trunk. Soon as me stepdaddy started to hike, I follyed him. He hadn't put me nex' to de game he was workin', an' I was kinder leery dat it was in de shade. T'inks I to meself, 'I'll do de shady act, an' find out where Flippy hangs out, an' who's stakin' him.' It was a long pipe dat I had, but 'fore dark I had me man holed in de outsquirts. Near de cemingtery he bumps agin' de Dago, an' dey chases off to dis crib I was a-tellin' you of, Mr. Carter."

"Can you describe it, and give me its exact location?" asked Nick.

"Cert! It's a big barn of a house, not far from de track of de Chicago and Rock Island Railway."

"What is it constructed of—wood?"

"No; brick an' stone. It's a corkin' big crib. Dere ain't no house near it, an' it stan's in a place as big as a park, wid lots of trees an' scrubberies. Me stepdaddy an' de Dago went t'rough an iron gate in a high, stone fence."

Nick's eyes gleamed with understanding. "You're a good boy," he said, quickly and heartily; "and, when my work in this case is over, I shall see to it that you are placed on Easy Street." He patted the boy on the shoulder. Paddy's heart swelled with pride. At that moment he was ready to go through fire and water for the great detective.

"For a few days, Paddy," Nick went on, speaking earnestly, "you must be kept out of sight. Your stepfather must not know that you have returned from La Porte. Patsy will find a safe place for you. Go with him, and stay where he puts you until I am ready to talk with you again."

Before the boy left, Nick drew Patsy aside and gave

him certain instructions relative to the disposal of this new ally. When the pair had gone, the great detective turned on Chick a countenance indicative of the profoundest satisfaction.

"Patsy always does come in at the right moment with the right information," said Chick, with a gratified smile. "How did he round up the kid? Did he tell you?"

"Just before he went out with Paddy he told his story. It was very short and very modestly given. He nosed around in the North Side until he found a boy who knew Paddy, and who had seen the little fellow take the train for the East. Patsy could not dig up anything to indicate that Paddy was the boy who was seen at Garfield Park with the trunk, but the fact that Paddy was a chronic impecune—that's new, but it hits the bull's-eye—invested with suspicion the fact of the sudden acquisition of money sufficient to buy a ticket for a train ride. From the conductor of the train Patsy learned the name of the station for which the ticket had been purchased. At La Porte he was aided by the police, and in a few hours he lit upon the boy."

"And the boy has told us where we may find Palazzo and Rolles, for it is not probable that they will leave their hiding place for a while."

"No. Palazzo is sharp, and he knows that for some time every avenue of escape from the city will be watched. He will lie low for a week, at least. But we must catch him as soon as possible. I know him now, I have all the evidence I want, and there need be no delay in moving on his works."

"Do you know anything about the house beyond the cemetery?"

"Yes. Paddy's description identifies it with a notorious haunt of thieves in the eighties. The gang was broken up some ten years ago, and the house has probably been unoccupied ever since. At the time the gang of guns occupied it, the property belonged to an estate which was in litigation. I presume no settlement has yet been effected. I was over the place years ago. The house is full of secret passages, cellars and tunnels. I remember that there was one tunnel with an outlet at the foot of a bank within a short distance of Lake Calumet. To-morrow night I am going to enter that tunnel on a tour of investigation."

"Preliminary to a raid?"

"Yes. You and Patsy will go with me to the house, of course, and I will arrange with the chief of police for outside help in case it should be required."

"Good. I think I see Mr. Palazzo's finish, Nick."

"I hope we may be able to wind up the affair to-morrow night, Chick, but it won't do to crow until we are out of the woods. You must not forget that we are up against a tough proposition. Palazzo is as cunning as he is unscrupulous, and we may have trouble before we land him."

"You tackle Palazzy and leave Rolles to me," said Chick, as he showed his teeth in an ugly smile. "I am itching to lay my clam hooks on the geezer that plugged the horse last night."

"He's your meat if he comes your way, Chick."

"By the way, Nick, have you figured out that matter of Palazzo's catching onto the trap last night? It is a sure shot that he was fooled up to the moment of our lining up in front of the piano. What opened his eyes, I wonder?"

"I have been thinking the affair over, Chick," replied the great detective, "and I believe I have struck the explanation of Palazzo's actions after we left the piano. He was standing back of Ralph Alanson, alias the Signorina Moletto. During the prelude he gave a sudden start, looked up quickly and sharply at me, and then composed his face and looked down again. He had made an alarming discovery, and I am satisfied that the discovery came while his eyes were fixed on the back of the signorina's head. Her wig had probably become slightly disarranged and the hair of the man had been disclosed. Ralph's hair is coarse, that of the wig was fine and silky. The discovery was enough for a keen-witted man like the Sicilian. He understood the whole plot at once and prepared to foil it. Whether or not he penetrated my disguise I cannot say. But he must have guessed that I was an important party in the scheme to entrap him. His after movements were unexpectedly assisted by Ralph Alanson, who, ignorant of his peril, foolishly played into his enemy's hands."

"You were away making your microscopic examination and comparison when the little circus on the sidewalk came off, Nick. What did you discover?"

"Just what I had expected. The hairs on the lock which you cut from Count Casserta's head were in all respects identical with the singed hairs found by me in the room where the murder of Rupert Alanson was committed. I could not compare tips on account of the singeing of what will be called at the trial, if there shall ever be a trial, exhibit No. 1; but the shaft comparison was sufficient. It is possible that there is in existence

somewhere in the world a person who is my exact physical counterpart. But I have never seen him. Remarkable resemblances are common; as, for instance, my resemblance to Sandow and others I could name. But when face to face and subjected to a searching, rigid comparison, points of dissimilarity can be observed. So it is with the hairs of the head of a human being. No two heads of hair are alike in every respect. Superficial examination may fail to exhibit any dissimilarity, but the microscope will reveal the differences in the arrangement and character of the tissues. Now, in the inspection of the hairs that came from Palazzo's head, I found certain peculiarities in the compacted cells of the shaft. These peculiarities were duplicated in the hairs found in the room of the summerhouse. It is not necessary to go into technical detail. Experts will cover the ground thoroughly at the proper time."

The detectives needed rest after the arduous labors of the day and the loss of sleep on the previous night, and so the conversation was not prolonged.

The next day a watch over the house supposed to shelter Palazzo and Rolles was maintained, but none came out or went in.

When night came Nick Carter, all his plans arranged, started alone for the place. Chick and Patsy were to follow after a short interval.

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE CAMP OF THE ENEMY.

Skirting the grounds at the rear Nick Carter found the tunnel to which he had alluded to in his talk with Chick. It was masked by tall weeds, and there were no indications that it had been recently used. Nick pushed away the weeds and entered upon his underground journey. His design was to locate the two villains, and then return through the tunnel and arrange with Chick and Patsy for the capture. For about one hundred feet the detective proceeded, and then stopped in front of a brick wall. His progress was unexpectedly barred. When he had visited the house years before, the tunnel entrance was concealed by a false door, provided with a secret panel. Since then, for some reason, this way of exit from the house had been effectually closed by the brickwork in the tunnel.

Nick's bull's-eye was lighted, and he examined the wall closely. The bricks had been in position for a long time. To his joy, he found one that was loose. He drew it out, and saw there was but one thickness of brick behind the wooden door. As there was a possibility that he might find use for the instruments when out of the tunnel and in the house, the detective had brought with him a small jimmy and screwdriver. The jimmy was sufficient for the work in hand. Working swiftly, but carefully, he succeeded, in half an hour, in removing all the bricks. Now he tried to operate the secret panel, the location of which he had not forgotten. It opened, and he passed into a large cellar. The air was close and musty, and Nick got out of the hole as soon as possible. Ascending some narrow steps, he came to another closed door. This, also, as the detective knew, had a secret panel. He went through the opening made by the slipping aside of the panel, to come upon a flight of stairs. Up them he went until he reached the door of a room in one of the upper stories of the house. The knob yielded to his manipulation, and, softly pushing open the door, he stepped into a room bare of furniture. But he did not move forward immediately, for from a room beyond came the subdued sound of voices. The detective's eyes glinted in fierce delight. He had trailed the villains to their lair.

For a moment he stood silent as a stone. Then slowly, softly, he stole across the floor, and halted in front of the door opening into the apartment from whence the sound of the voices had come. The key was not in the keyhole, and, stooping down, Nick peered through the hole into the room. What he saw cemented his satisfaction. Beside a small table, on which were bottles and glasses, sat Lucio Palazzo and Jim Rolles. They had been drinking heavily, for their voices were thick, and they talked loudly, so that every word could be heard by the listener.

"Shay," said Rolles, as he cocked his head and looked at his companion, "if that 'Lan—'Lan—'Lannerson don't croak, whad yer goin' ter do?"

"I staya here until I maka heem what you call groke," answered Palazzo, with decision.

"Well, we'll know how we stand 'fore many days, old son."

"*Si*, sure! Eef I would tella da Mafia go keel Alanson, they keel right away. Bud I no care tell dose Mafia. They would wanta da davide."

"You're right, Palazzy; there'sh no whack up, 'cept with me. Shay, ain't that th' unnerstan'in'?"

"That ees whata I tella you, Jim. You staya by me, I staya by you. We keel Ralph Alanson and Neeck Car-

ter, and then we go Eetaly and geta da beeg mon' from da Cosca."

"Ours, then, is the compact of death. Blood we win, an'——"

"With Neeck Carter alive, we musta lose."

"You're gamblin' that Nick's alive, are you?"

"He musta be alive. No man buta Neeck Carter could hava put upa da job at da marchese's. I no foola with heem any more. The nex' time I go to keel Neeck Carter, I keel heem for sure!"

"Now you're oratin' to suit! An', when we've settled our business here, we'll hike to New York an' lay low a while. I know a hole on the Hudson, not far from the city, that's a jim-dandy of a place to hide in."

"Alla right, Jim. Taka another dreenk. You're queeck getta da sober face."

Rolles drank, not once, but twice. Soon his voice became thick again. Nick Carter remained but a short time longer in his position behind the door. He had seen and heard enough. If only the villains would keep on drinking, their capture would been an easy matter.

Making his way to the mouth of the tunnel, Nick found Chick and Patsy anxiously awaiting his reappearance. His plan was quickly unfolded. He and Patsy would return to the house, by way of the tunnel, while Chick would enter the house from the front.

With Chick would be two of the officers furnished by the chief of police. The signal for the united entrance into the room occupied by Palazzo and Rolles was to be a knock on the door outside of which Chick and his men would be stationed. Nick would have taken upon himself the duty of signaling but for the belief that he would reach his post long before Chick could arrive at the other door. It was essential for the success of the undertaking that both forces should be in position before the signal for active work should be given.

When Nick and Patsy found themselves in the room adjoining the lair of the two murderers, they stopped and listened for evidence that their quarry had not departed. For a few moments not a sound was heard. Then a noise, as of some person snoring, greeted their ears. Walking noiselessly to the connecting door, Nick looked through the keyhole. Palazzo was sitting by the table, smoking; Rolles lay on the floor, apparently in a drunken sleep. As he looked, Palazzo arose, stretched himself and yawned. A moment he stood with his arms raised, and then he advanced toward the door behind which Nick Carter was kneeling. The detective drew a deep breath, straightened up and prepared for what was to come. It was not yet time for Chick to make his appearance at the other door, and, if Palazzo should precipitate the encounter by opening the door toward which he was directing his steps, Nick would have more on his hands than he had bargained for. And yet he felt not the slightest uneasiness. It would be an easy contest. He could attend to Palazzo, while Patsy ought to have no difficulty in managing the drunken Rolles.

The footsteps came nearer. Palazzo placed his hand on the knob of the door. Nick, with every muscle tense, waited for him to show his face. But the knob was not turned. If it had been Palazzo's intention, when he left the table, to enter the room which held Nick Carter and Patsy, it was evident that he had changed his mind, for he walked back to the table, poured some liquor into a glass and drank it. Smacking his lips, he resumed his seat. Nick again had recourse to the keyhole. What he next observed made him knit his brows. Palazzo, gazing straight at the door, smiled and showed his teeth. Then he laughed, not loudly, but softly, and helped himself to another drink. A suspicion of the truth entered Nick's brain. If Chick would only give the signal! It was now time for it. What was detaining him?

Suddenly the Italian left his chair, and, taking hold of the body of Rolles, dragged it under the table. While he was occupied with this work, the looked-for signal came. Upon the instant Nick and Patsy, acting in concert, threw themselves against the door. It fell forward, and they dashed into the room to meet Chick and the two members of the Chicago police. Each party stared at the other, Chick and his men speechless, Nick Carter in disgust. The birds had flown. And gone was the table, with its bottles and glasses. In the twinkling of an eye Palazzo and Rolles had disappeared.

"The table was over a trap," said Nick. "It must open into a subcellar. We'll scatter our forces, and we may get them yet."

"Why not go down the trap?" suggested a policeman.

"And get a bullet in your neck?" retorted Nick. "No; that play is what Palazzo is looking for. I'll tell you what to do." The instructions were quickly given, the men departed, and the room was deserted.

But Nick Carter did not go far. He returned to the room where he had played the rôle of eavesdropper. Chick was with him. Nick took a position on one side of the open doorway, Chick upon the other. Five minutes passed, and then was heard a scraping noise from

the room where the table had been. Nick looked across at Chick, as if to say, "I called the turn, all right." The scraping ceased, footsteps were heard, and now the two detectives knew that either Palazzo or Rolles, or both, had returned.

The time for action had come. Simultaneously, they made for the doorway.

CHAPTER X.

NICK CLOSES UP THE ACCOUNT.

Nick and Chick rushed into the room, and saw Lucio Palazzo standing by the wall, a few feet from the table, which had made its reappearance, covering the trap. His back was toward them, but he wheeled at the sound of their steps, and, without waiting for the command, threw up his hands. "You hava da call, Neeck," he said, with no perceptible agitation of manner, "and I elevata—whata you call it—da sponge."

The detectives did not lower their pistols. "You will keep your hands up," was Nick's stern utterance, "until further orders! Chick, disarm him, while I hold the bead."

Chick did not obey. Instead, he did a most surprising thing. He flung his revolver with all his might at Palazzo's head, and the next instant sprang forward and caught the reeling villain about the waist, pinioning his arms. On the floor they struggled, the Italian in ferocious desperation, Chick with the grim determination of a bulldog, until Nick Carter took a hand. The subjugation of Palazzo was soon accomplished. Securely bound and bleeding profusely from a cut over the temple, produced by the impact of Chick's revolver, the murderer of Rupert Alanson lay on the floor, and gritted his teeth in the impotence of savage despair.

"I struck out just in time," explained Chick, as he pantingly arose to his feet. "There's another secret panel over there in the wall—this joint seems to be full of them—and the spring is near the floor. Palazzo had his foot raised to give the spot which covers the spring a kick when I cut loose."

Nick made an examination, and the truth of Chick's statement was demonstrated. The panel was a large one, and the murderer might have used the opening and perhaps have escaped but for Chick's prompt and effective action.

"You are strictly all right," said the great detective to his skillful assistant; "but, then, you're always ready when the gong sounds." He smiled, and the smile on Chick was worth more than the words.

There was water in the room, and, after the defeated villain's wound had received proper attention, he was propped against the wall fronting the detectives, who occupied chairs.

Palazzo had now recovered his nerve. He was beaten, but he determined to bear his defeat gracefully.

"You lika da mon'?" he asked, with his eyes on Nick Carter's face.

"Money has its uses, and is always acceptable, under honest conditions," replied Nick, quietly.

"I no wanta da preach. Be a mana da worl'. Taka da mon' whera you find it. Joina da Mafe, and you get reecha too queeck."

Nick knew that a compliment was intended, but he also knew that Palazzo had no expectation that his suggestion would be favorably received. It was mere talk for talk's sake.

In answer to questions, the captured assassin stated that, when he started for the door behind which the detectives were posted, Nick at the keyhole, his intention was to explore the route to the tunnel by means of which Nick had entered the house. He knew of the brickwork behind the false wooden door, but he knew, also, that another way of exit had been provided. He had his hand on the knob, and was about to turn it when his sharp ears caught the faint sound of a movement in the room he was preparing to enter. The sound was undoubtedly made by Nick Carter as he arose from his stooping posture in front of the keyhole. Instantly it flashed on Palazzo's mind that his enemies—the officers of the law—had tracked him to his hiding place, and that the moment of attack was close at hand. Returning to the table, he made arrangements for the disappearance through the trapdoor.

His return to the room was for the purpose of facilitating his escape from the officers. The house had a tower—he himself had walled up the regular stairway approach—but there was a secret stairway behind the panel in the wall. He was about to press the spring when Chick suddenly and unexpectedly assaulted him. He had made provision for possible discovery of his presence in the house. In the tower room there were articles of food sufficient to sustain life for a month.

Palazzo stubbornly refused to say anything about the Alanson affair, and Nick Carter did not think it necessary to expose his hand.

In a little while Patsy came in. He was overjoyed to find that the chief malefactor had been arrested. Rolles had escaped. Search had been made in every portion of the house, but without avail. An entrance to the subcellar had been found, but Rolles had not escaped that way, for the door was bolted on the outside, and the rust was so thick about the bolt that some difficulty was experienced in throwing it back. Arrived in the cellar, the walls had been sounded, but no secret doors or panels were found. How Rolles had left the cellar was a mystery.

While Patsy was talking, the local officers entered the room.

Their faces were downcast until their eyes lighted on Palazzo. "Well, I am glad you have succeeded, if we haven't," one of them said to Nick. "We may get Rolles yet," returned the detective. There was confidence in his voice. Chick looked at him inquiringly. "What is your opinion?" said Nick to Palazzo.

The Italian started slightly. Then he said, with assumed indifference: "I hava none."

"Then I'll tell you mine. Both you and Rolles returned to this room. Rolles came first, and the moment he touched the floor he made for the secret panel in the wall. If I had entered the room a moment sooner than I did, I might have seen him; but, as it was, I came in to find you alone, but just in the act of following in the steps of your confederate."

"Then Rolles is in the tower," said Chick, quickly.

"He was there ten minutes ago," replied Nick, "and I hope we will find him there now."

With these words, he walked to the wall, pressed the spring, and, when the panel moved aside, entered the opening. On the narrow stairway he paused, and said: "Chick, you may come with me. Patsy, you and the officers will go down into the yard and watch the tower. If Rolles has not already descended, he may try to do so. There is probably a rope ladder in the tower."

Up the stairs went Nick and Chick. They reached the observatory room, to find it empty. Above was openwork. Nobody there. Opening one of the windows, Nick uttered an exclamation of disgust. His hand touched a rope ladder, which was long enough, as observed by the light of his bull's-eye, to reach the mansard roof of the house. "That's how he escaped," he said. "He got to the roof, and then slid down to a waterspout running from the roof to the ground."

"Then we've lost him," remarked Chick, in acute disappointment.

"Perhaps not. There is a large force of officers guarding the grounds. It will be hard to escape them."

As he spoke, several pistol shots were heard. They came from a corner of the inclosure near the bank at the foot of which was the mouth of the tunnel. Nick and Chick hurried down the stairs. In the room Patsy still guarded Palazzo. Nick hesitated a moment, and then said: "Patsy is all right, but it won't do to take any chances. I'll double the guard. Chick, you will keep Patsy company while I am investigating this outside matter."

With a rush, he was gone.

Reaching the spot from whence the firing had proceeded, Nick found a policeman sitting under a tree nursing a wounded leg. Others of his party, he said, were in pursuit of the man who had shot him. The detective would have remained a few minutes, long enough to give some attention to the wound, but the officer said: "Don't bother about me. I am all right. I have stopped the flow of blood, and have got the leg bound up in good enough shape for the present."

Nick hastened away, going in the direction which the wounded officer said the fugitive had taken. The prospect was not encouraging. The night was dark, and, after going down the bank, Nick had nothing to guide him.

He was proceeding in the direction of Lake Calumet, when he met one of the policemen who had pursued the fleeing outlaw.

"No luck," he said. "He had too good a start. If I hadn't stopped to look after Bob, who got the bullet, I might have caught him."

The officer's story of the happenings in the grounds was quickly given. "Bob" had seen the man stealing through the brush, and had at once blazed away. The shot was returned, and "Bob" went down, with a bullet in his knee. "I was at some little distance away," said the officer, "but I hurried up, found 'Bob' on the ground, stayed with him until I made sure that he would not bleed to death, and then ran after the shooter, whose figure I could just discern near the bank. Though he was out of range, I fired two or three shots, in the hope that I might induce him to stop. But he kept right on, and, when I got to the bank, he was nowhere in sight."

Nick thought of the tunnel. Perhaps Rolles had sought refuge in there. It was explored, as were all parts of

the building and grounds, but no trace of Palazzo's confederate could be found.

Toward daylight, all hope of catching Rolles having been given up, Lucio Palazzo was removed to the city prison, and Nick, Chick and Patsy snatched a few hours sleep.

For days the search for Rolles was diligently prosecuted. But the fugitive had covered his tracks so well that not a clew to his whereabouts could be found. On the fourth day Nick and his assistants held a consultation.

"It's my opinion, boys," said Nick, "that Rolles has gone to New York. A sharp criminal—and Rolles is one—could have made his escape from the city in spite of the cordon of police and detectives. I want him—I want him badly—for he is really a more dangerous criminal than Palazzo. He is just as cold-blooded as the Italian, and he has this advantage over Palazzo—he is an American, and knows American ways and the ins and outs of American cities. And he is still more dangerous because he has succeeded Palazzo as the murderous agent of the Cosca."

"What makes you think so?" asked Chick.

"A consideration of many circumstances. The attitude of Palazzo alone is sufficient, in my mind, to show that the Italian is relying on Rolles to carry out the bloody program which was mapped out in Sicily. I believe that Rolles has taken the oath of the Mafia, and has been initiated into all its fiendish secrets. Palazzo did not call on the Mafia of Chicago for aid. Rolles, if he shall find himself in a tight place, will have no hesitancy in asking the protection and assistance of the New York branch."

"You referred to Palazzo's attitude, Mr. Carter," said Patsy. "I must confess that I don't understand you."

"I will explain," replied Nick. "To begin, Palazzo, though he may have no hope of escaping death at the hands of the law, will yet desire to have his plot of vengeance carried out. He will wish to have it carried out for two reasons. First, because he represents the Cosca, and would be faithful to its vows; and, secondly, because he has a deep personal interest in the matter which brought him to the United States. He hates Ralph Alanson. In Sicily, Alanson beat him almost to a pulp. He arose from the bed on which his injuries had placed him with murder in his heart. When he was selected by the Cosca to carry out the death sentence pronounced upon the Alansons, he must have jumped in satanic joy."

"That's plain enough, in part," remarked Patsy, as Nick paused, "but where does Rolles come in?"

"Rolles comes in when Palazzo steps out. The Cosca is very liberal with its agents. The agent for the murder of the Alansons has doubtless been promised a big pot of money for his work. Rolles knows this, and Rolles will try to earn it. I am satisfied on this point, for, if Rolles and Palazzo had not had a perfect understanding in regard to this matter, Palazzo would not have allowed Rolles to escape. The Sicilian is devoid of sentiment. He is selfish to the core. A man of his stripe, without the understanding in reference to unfinished work, which Palazzo and Rolles must have had, would not have gone to prison without taking his accomplice along with him. But what did the Sicilian do? He saw Rolles open the secret panel and go up the stairs to the tower, and never opened his mouth. If he had spoken when we were roping him, or even when we sat him down against the wall, we would have caught the American. But he kept silent. He did more. He changed color when, at last, I gave it as my opinion that Rolles was in the tower."

"Your reasoning is good," said Patsy. "And we must look for him in or near New York; is that the idea?"

"Yes. From remarks made by Rolles while talking with Palazzo—all of which I overheard—there is a hiding place on the Hudson, not far from the city. We must look it up, and at once."

The next morning Nick Carter took the train for New York. Patsy was left behind. There was a bare possibility that Rolles was still in Chicago, and Patsy was intrusted to make certain investigations, and also send daily reports of the condition of Ralph Alanson.

Arrived in New York, the detectives lost no time in following up the Hudson River clew. Nick took one side of the river, Chick the other. The second day of the hunt found Nick at Yonkers, and in earnest conversation with a reformed gun who had just come from Tarrytown. He knew Jim Rolles, and had seen him but a few hours before. Rolles was then on the way to a restaurant. The talk between the two men was unimportant. Rolles did not say what his plans were.

The up train came along in half an hour. Nick bought a ticket for Tarrytown, and, when that station was reached, he began a search for Palazzo's successor. Before the expiration of an hour he learned that a man answering the description of Rolles had hired a rig at a livery stable to go to Croton Landing.

"How long has he been gone?" asked Nick.

"About half an hour."

The great detective quickly made up his mind what to do. He would not wait for another train. He would take the road in an auto. One was procured from the proprietor of one of the hotels, and, putting on speed not approved by the law, Nick went dashing toward Sing Sing and the country beyond.

At Sing Sing the information came that his quarry had passed through the town but fifteen minutes before. This was welcome news. The detective resumed the pursuit, his nerves tingling and a fierce hope gripping his heart.

Twenty minutes run brought him in sight of a man in a road wagon. The man looked over his shoulder as the auto approached, and then, seizing the whip, gave his horse a fierce cut on the flank. The animal leaped forward and then broke into a furious gallop. Nick, with exultation in his countenance, opened up and sped after the runaway at a pace that made his hair rise. He had found his man, for, when the driver in the wagon had turned his head, the face of Jim Rolles was disclosed.

On they went, the pursuer and the pursued, until Nick's auto was within thirty feet of the wagon. "Stop!" the detective shouted; "or I will shoot!"

Rolles did not answer. A shot was fired. Still Rolles, lashing his horse, kept his back toward his pursuer. Nick's first shot had been fired in the air. He tried his revolver a second time, aiming at the horse. The conditions were not favorable for effective pistol work along this line, and, therefore, the shot went wild. There was but one way in which to bring matters to a climax, and Nick took it. A few turns of the wheel, and the auto crashed into the wagon. Over it went, throwing Rolles against a grassy bank with such force that the breath left his body, and he lay for a minute without consciousness. When he opened his eyes, Nick Carter was sitting on his chest, with a suggestive cord in his hand. It would be useless to struggle. Rolles knew it was time to quit, so he remained passive while Nick Carter went through a necessary performance.

His work done, the detective looked around, to see what had become of the rig. Horse and wagon were gone. Wild with fright, the animal had taken himself away, dragging the wrecked vehicle at his heels.

The prisoner went to New York in the auto. He declined to talk about the murder or his connection with Palazzo, but admitted that he had left Chicago to find a hiding place near the Hudson.

"I did not suppose that I would be looked for outside of Chicago for a fortnight, at least," he said; "and, when you overhauled me, I was on my way to prospect the hole I had used years ago. If I had found everything all right, I should have crawled into it to-night."

The next day Rolles started for Chicago. Nick and Chick bore him company.

The chief of police of the Windy City could not find words to fully express his appreciation of the skillful and effective work of the great detective and his assistants.

"Nick," said he, "you are throwing yourself away by sticking to New York. Come to Chicago and get in with the world's people. Don't stagnate in a one-horse burg like the cluster of shanties on Manhattan Island. Come here, where we scrape the sky and drink water from the clouds. Come——"

"Come off!" interrupted Nick, laughing. "You know I like this hamlet, and, when you shall have cut down a few more trees, I may buy a quarter section and go into the chicken business."

In due time Lucio Palazzo and Jim Rolles were tried for the murder of Rupert Alanson. Nick Carter was able to gather other evidence in addition to that with which the reader is familiar. Ten-Ichi, in New York, had traced the trunk to the place of purchase, and produced the proof that the purchaser was Jim Rolles. The singed hairs made a powerful weapon in the hands of the prosecution. The defendants were found guilty, and sentenced to death. On one stormy Friday the double sentence was executed.

Demosthenes P. Q. McGirk, "Paddy" for short, is now a protégé of Nick Carter. He can both read and write, and he is filled with the ambition to be a lawyer. He was one of the most important witnesses at the trial, and the public prosecutor's management of the case excited his keenest admiration. Nick will see that the opportunities for rising in the world are placed in his way.

Ralph Alanson recovered from his wound, and, leaving Chicago, went to Australia, where, under an assumed name, he hopes to forever escape the vengeance of the Mafia.

THE END.

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